Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

NICHOLAS SHAPIRO LAKAS

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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[Note: This interview was not edited by Mr. Lakas.]

Q: I was wondering whether we can start by when and where were you born?

LAKAS: New York City, Manhattan, on March 13, 1920.

Q: Can you tell me something about the background of, first your father, and then your mother, please?

LAKAS: My dad was born in Macedonia, in a town called Kozani. It was under Turkish occupation at that time. He emigrated to the United States, sometime early in 1900. My mother was born in Sparta. She emigrated to the United States, the same time as my father. They married in New York City. They met there.

Q: They were both Greek Orthodox?

LAKAS: She was half Greek.

Q: Was this a strong strain that ran in your family, with both the church and Greek...?

LAKAS: Unquestionably. They spoke Greek in the house for quite sometime, to the point where, I think I was about seven or eight, and suggested to my mother that since this was America, we ought to speak some English.

Q: So, you grew up speaking Greek, then?

LAKAS: Yes, I'm fluent in Greek.

Q: What type of business was your father in?

LAKAS: A chef.

Q: Where? I mean, did he move around?

LAKAS: Yes, he did in New York City, from various places. I don't remember particularly what restaurants he worked with. Sometimes they were cafeterias, and sometimes they were full service restaurants. But, that is all I can remember. Once in a while, we persuaded him to cook in the house. I was quite impressed with his cooking.

Q: I take it your mother was at home?

LAKAS: Oh yes, absolutely.

Q: Brothers, sisters?

LAKAS: No, I'm an only child.

Q: Did you grow up in New York City the whole time?

LAKAS: Until I was 19 years old.

Q: That's pretty much growing up there.

LAKAS: I'm a product of the public school system. The Regents board in my family was quite common in my day. I attended PS 45 on 24th Street, in between Eighth and Seventh Avenue, then up to Harlem and attended PS 110 on Lennox Avenue, and 116th. Then, we moved over to PS 165, on 109th Street, between Amsterdam and Broadway, and then went to George Washington High School. They had an annex at the time. We did one year at the annex, and then two years over there, because of junior high school in New York City.

Q: I would like to go back to when you were in elementary school. Was it completely an urban area?

LAKAS: It was very much New York City, Manhattan.

Q: Was the street your playground, more or less?

LAKAS: The seasons were clearly demarked by what games you played. We played stick ball.

Q: You played with a broom stick.

LAKAS: Yes, and we used the sewers as plates. We had some problems with the traffic, but we managed. Then, there would be roller skating.

Q: Did you play hockey?

LAKAS: No. We played stickball, ball games, the famous game, hardball. Central Park was quite near us, so we could use the facilities at Central Park. Did you ever see spinning tops?

Q: Yes.

LAKAS: That also marked the beginning of a season.

Q: Where you would try to knock somebody else's top off?

LAKAS: Yes, and then there were marbles. Depending on what neighborhood you lived in, Italian, Greek or mixture, prominence would be given to certain games. Also, we were quite acclimating. Mixing in my apartment building. I remember Italians living above me, and people next to me were Irish, one floor down. In the evening, we kids would be invited to have dumplings and cabbage, or whatever was available. I think it had something to do with preparing me for my Foreign Service career. Because of the cosmopolitan, you became accustomed to neighbors of different religions and backgrounds. Everyone was very friendly. We all were of one economic stratum. We weren't so badly off, and then in 1929 and 1930, the effects of the depression began to move in.

Q: You were able to feel it.

LAKAS: Oh, very much so, because I remember seeing my father unable to get jobs as a chef. It reduced our income a great deal. Our income at that time was a good salary; it was $30 or $35 a week. We did quite well on that. I can remember my mother could take one pot and create an entire banquet. Being a close-knit family as we were, Greeks, cousins, first, second cousins, extended family, it was usual for a door to open on a Sunday, and there they were. They were uninvited, but we never thought of inviting anyone, it was just the way it was. The women would go in the kitchen and help prepare food. I miss that, particularly the grandfather, grandmother hierarchy. They sort of presided over the family. When we appealed to them for a Supreme Court decision... What should be done with me, for example, they told you, and mother and dad respected them a great deal. When I say I miss it, I don't think I'm going to cry about it, but I miss the unity, I miss the substance, the depth of family caring for one another, particularly, without asking, you were cared for. When approaching my age, you were cared for.

Q: Well, at home, when you were growing up, by the time you were 12, or 13, Roosevelt was in, and the New Deal, and the depression and all. I was wondering how much this probated for what you remember?

LAKAS: First of all, to us Greek folk, President Roosevelt was pretty close to one of the Gods on Mount Olympus. Not everybody had a radio, and we didn't. So, perhaps, a sign of my time was that we would tell everyone that there would be a fireside chat. We would all rush out to hear it, and hang onto every word, because we trusted the man. He seemed to speak to us, and give us the hope we felt we needed, particularly being in New York City, a major city, or Detroit, or Chicago. We seemed to be besieged by the approach of the revolution. There was a lot of unhappiness. It hit me almost immediately as a young child. To walk down Sixth Avenue or Seventh, Thirtieth or Fortieth Street, where the employment offices were located, with signs outside that said, "Busboy wanted," for example. There would be, perhaps, 150 people lined up to interview for the job. Even more than that, people were selling apples and oranges from crates, on the street corners, for a nickel. There would be the area where you would receive food for the "homeless," so to speak, but you weren't really homeless. You were destitute. That hit me very, very much, as to how this could happen, when earlier, there seemed to be prosperity. Everybody seemed to be comfortable, and now, I see people selling apples for a nickel.

In my case, I needed a coat, and I had holes in my shoes, the soles. My mother would say, "We'll go down and see your uncle, and see if we can borrow $5.00," and sometimes we would find out there was none. This sort of gives you a feeling that my father, having been the provider of the family, had been quieted by the situation of that time. For what? He didn't have a job. My mother tried to pull us together, and she did the best she could. It didn't hit me as much in my morale, as it hit my parents. Things got worse, and worse and worse, until we went on what was called "home relief," or welfare. I remember how unhappy I was having to go down to the office of the welfare people to collect bags of potatoes, and whatever else they had available for us to bring home. I found it very humiliating. I remember my father going into a hospital, not feeling particularly well... I now know why... and leaving my mother and myself to fend for ourselves. Of course, we were on welfare. I remember moving away from the apartment that had two bedrooms and a nice kitchen, and a living room, to a one-room flat, where I slept in the same bed with my mom. Slowly, but surely, with the advent of war in Europe, things began to change, slightly.

When I graduated in 1938, from George Washington High School, I couldn't find a job anywhere. I would get up in the morning at 3:00, to rush down to Macy's, and get in a that went around the block to 34th Street, three times, for a job to package gifts or whatever. I still couldn't get anything. I tried working in vegetable shops, with the front being open for you to select your vegetables. I couldn't do that. We were able to go to Coney Island, which is a resort area, and get a job in a place called Paradise Grill. It was a full service kind of bar, frankfurters and hamburgers, corn on the cob and whatever meals were available. If I remember correctly, one of them was corn beef and cabbage. My Dad and I both got the jobs. I was washing dishes, and he was at the bar. He received $25.00 a week for 14 hours a day. Washing dishes, I think I got $15.00 a week. This was on a week now. When the crowds would come in for the weekend, particularly for the Memorial Day, and the other holidays, it was something to deal with. But, at least it helped us get back on our feet. It taught me some very significant lessons. One time my father turned to me when things had eased off a bit, and said, "Do you like what you are doing?" I said, "No, pop, I don't like what I'm doing." He said, "What are you going to do about it?" I said, "I'm not sure yet." He said, "I know what you are going to do about it, you're going to become well educated and you're going to become better than I am." That's impossible. These are people who emigrated from a country overseas, not knowing English, and coming over to America, without knowing people, and to be able to start a family, and to have a new beginning. Remarkable. These are people telling me that I should be better than they. I didn't realize the significance of this until much later. Anyway, one day I saw an advertisement in the newspaper that the federal government was issuing examinations for assistant messenger and clerk, and what have you. I went down and took it. I got a magnificent grade of 99.9, which required me to spell, cat, mouse, and dog. My penmanship was also scored as well. It took about a year to hear from them in Washington. This was 1939, and they offered me a job as an assistant messenger, at the magnificent salary of $1,080 a year.

Q: I want to stop there and go back, before we come to there, to talk about your schooling, during this very difficult time. When you were in elementary and high school, what sort of things did you enjoy and didn't like in the school system?

LAKAS: I really don't remember any dislikes, but I remember I was fond of their music department. I was fond of playing the violin, and being in the orchestra, and performing for graduating classes, pomp and circumstance, for example. I enjoyed gym. I enjoyed the games we were asked to play up in the gymnasium. I had a great feel for history. Looking back on it now, I seemed as if I was reading a novel. I was also happy to be asked to get up and make a speech. In English classes, this was mandatory. You had to give a five or ten minute speech as a class essay on something important. You visited Greece, for example, what did you see, what did you do, what did you feel about Greece? Another example would be you went to see a baseball game for the first time in your life, as I did. It was the New York Giants, up in the Polo Grounds. I spoke about that, without preparing anything on paper. I think that was the first clue that I thought I could speak well extemporaneously. I was able to begin to visualize sentences and paragraphs. Still, today, it makes me a greater speaker at the State Department. Also, I'm going to be president of the alumni association at GW, and I speak a great deal. Those are the things I remember. Looking back on it now, I carried them with me without knowing it. For example, the decision to try to enter the Foreign Service.

Q: Were there any teachers who particularly inspired you?

LAKAS: A number of them. Some put the fear of God in me as well. The French teacher was huge. She could have been a wrestling champ somewhere in Germany. She was relentless. The fear of having no sense of my mother or father, not having done my work properly. It was something I dreaded a great deal. But, mostly teachers were family oriented. You could talk to them. There weren't any great, special occasions where parents were invited to visit the school, or any PTA operation. It just was school and automatically, because you carried with you, the respect that was taught by your parents, for authority. They were very authoritarian. You carried that into the school. When the teacher spoke to you, it was, "No sir," and "Yes sir." God forbid if you were sent to the principal's office. It was a catastrophe. But, the authority kept us in line. We respected them, because these were people of knowledge. They knew things that I didn't know, and they taught me about some of these things. I carry great memories of how lucky I was to grow up in the public school system of New York City. I didn't know anything about private schools. I didn't know anything about universities. It was just the way it was going to be. So, you moved up from one grade to another, until you graduated. Most of us felt if we could get a job, or you finished high school, that was it. A good job. Don't ask me what it meant, but that is the phrase they used, "a good job."

Q: Was there any ethnic division within the school?

LAKAS: What we noticed was when there was a Jewish holiday, it was empty. When Greek Easter would come about, we would say that to our teacher, and I would have to stay home for this or that reason. She didn't even ask for a note. She knew that this was the Orthodox Easter weekend. That was fine. The Italians would have their festivals. What I saw there was a diversity that lead to unity. I used that theme in my early speeches. I remember when I was asked to talk about the United States, and the miracle of its survival. I used that theme of diversity lead to unity. I always remember there were so many different people. Yet, we all got along.

Q: In the depression era, were you hearing, whether it was from your parents, or while you were hanging around, that there were two great strains going on? One strain being fascism, and one being communism. Particularly in a major city, like New York, did these penetrate your area at all?

LAKAS: Yes it did. There were epithets. You could paint anyone, as to say that he is a communist. There were other things that I noticed as well. There were racial divisions. Not in my school, and not on the playground, but my parents carried that. They would say, "He was black." They referred to it. I didn't understand why they were making references to this. I didn't hear much about this elsewhere.

Q: They were bringing it from the old world, really.

LAKAS: I suppose. Yes, they brought their lives over from the old world. There's no question about it. By 1930, there were more Greeks in America than the Greeks in Greece.

Q: Were your parents, and people around, such as your extended family, talking about, "Oh, to go back to Sparta," or "To go back to Macedonia," or something like that? This wasn't a theme?

LAKAS: I began to hear this only in terms of a visit. There were societies such as a AHEPA (American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association), which by 1932, had begun to organize trips to Greece, for people who had not been back since 1900, and now had a little money in their pockets to do so. It became very fashionable to say, "I'm going down to Greece." What they did there, I have no idea. A number were very charitable. A number contributed to the construction of spring water aqueducts. A number built a school or two, or a church. They contributed. If I can remember correctly, there was a considerable amount of envy from the native Greeks for those who had gone to America, and worked and were successful. This occurred in the restaurant business, in particular. They didn't realize how hard the Greek Americans had worked the business.

Q: Was there at all a division between the Greeks and sort of where your family came from, the Greece proper, and those who got out from Anatolia, and came out to Smyrna in the 1920s?

LAKAS: Yes, I thought they were better educated. The Anatolia Greeks who had become refugees in 1922, they seemed to have a different attitude from the Greek Greeks in Macedonia or elsewhere. For a while, they seemed to be apart from the Greeks of Greece. They seemed smart. They seemed sharper. I didn't see that very often, but when I went into their homes as a kid, because they had children to play with, I would notice there was a difference. These were people who apparently were the descendants of Greeks way back when. They were well-versed in commerce.

Q: They really weren't a peasantry.

LAKAS: No. Those who came from the peasant class, I saw a difference. Anatolia Greeks had their own accent. The Macedonia Greeks had their own accent. It was Greek, but they had their own accent. You could tell right away.

Q: What did you speak, Macedonian or Peloponnesian Greek?

LAKAS: Peloponnese. My mother was a powerful figure in our house. But, the Macedonian accent is very distinct. It is very distinct. When I went back to inspect the consulate in Thessaloniki, in 1974, I was invited by the consul general, it was an interesting thing for me to do on a Saturday or a Sunday. I found family there, of course. The accent was enormous.

Q: One of the things that I have noticed is... I've been a consular officer most of my career. Two things are very apparent when you look at immigrants coming. There are three groups that have put a tremendous emphasis on education. One has been the Jews; the other, the Asians, particularly the Chinese, Koreans, Japanese; and the Greeks. I was consul general in Athens for four years from 1970 to 1974. You look at the most unpromising material going through; sort of a peasant class. Yet, you knew, if you started looking at where they ended up, the first generation would end up in a small grocery store, or a restaurant. The second generation would be doctors, lawyers, the whole thing.

LAKAS: Let me add to what you said. It's way beyond the calendar, where we are now. When I was sworn into the service, in 1947, AHEPA asked me if I would speak to the Sons of Peloponnese chapters to encourage the youngsters in terms of, see what I'm about to do, you can do it. You don't have to keep thinking that if you became a lawyer that would be it. You don't have to think that if you work for your Dad in the restaurant that would be it. There is a new horizon for you to look at. This is 1946. We've had a number of Greek Americans, as you know, and mid-level managers. My family and others believe one thing; that is, the way up the ladder socially, mobility up the ladder is education. They seemed to be so impressed with people who were literate, who were articulate, both in Greek and in English. They would say to me after they would leave, "See."

Q: So, this is something that permeated your...

LAKAS: Yes, it did.

Q: So, we're moving onto 1939, I guess. You graduated from high school, nowhere to go. Did you keep the dishwashing job?

LAKAS: That was for the summer. These were summer jobs. In the winter, I might work for NYA, the National Youth Administration, or WPA, the Works Project Administration, doing odd jobs, which would give me $98.00 or $99.00 a month, to help the family. Always, the money went to the family. She would set it aside, and give me maybe $4.00 or $5.00 to spend.

Q: Did you have any social life, girls, that sort of thing?

LAKAS: We were aware there were social constraints, and you heard about them. One constraint was "Don't bring shame to the family. Don't bring shame to our name." The other was, "Where are you going?" Well, "I'm going out," at the age of 17. "Where is out?" "Well, I'm going to a party to be given by a girl." "A girl. Is she Greek?" "Well, yes she is." "Well, what does her father do?"

Q: It hasn't changed a bit. I have some very good friends who are Greek. They want "a nice Greek girl."

LAKAS: "Don't be home later than 12:30." The same thing continued. Again, I'm going to jump a couple decades. I come back after having had combat experience as a Naval officer on LST (landing ship tanks). I've been through three campaigns including Anzio and Southern France, Marseilles. I return home for leave, before I go out to the Pacific, to become part of the invasion of Japan. I arrive home and, of course, I want to go out. I'm 25 years old. "Where are you going?" "I'm going out." "Where are you going?" "Well, I have a girlfriend that I used to go to college with." "Well, is she Greek?" "I don't think so, she is Scandinavian." "Scandinavian, are you serious?" "I just got home, Mom." But, you see, that continued. But, I handled it differently.

Q: Well, I do want to talk about the military side too. So, you are in line doing various things until this messenger job?

LAKAS: That's right.

Q: What was this job?

LAKAS: An assistant messenger at the Interstate Commerce Commission. It meant you picked up railway books and delivered, I don't know what else, from one office to the other.

Q: This is down in Washington?

LAKAS: Yes. I did not want to leave Mom and Dad. I did not want to leave New York City. I asked if I could stay in New York City with the same job. They said, "No, you have to come down here, by December 15th."

Q: Which is 1939.

LAKAS: Yes. My father had enough time to put me on the milk train. We left at 4:00 in the morning, and I got to Washington at 11:00. It was great to come out of the station and see the capitol. It had red brick sidewalks. I had never seen red brick sidewalks in my life before. I reported, and papers were completed. The first thing I did was go to the Greek church, to the old St. Sophia, down on 9th Street and L.

Q: It's now...

LAKAS: It's not the cathedral up here on Massachusetts Avenue.

Q: I know, but they were saying that St. Sophia is now... I'm not sure what it is.

LAKAS: A Korean church?

Q: It may be a Korean church.

LAKAS: Right away, into the Greek AHEPAs. No question, into the church, into the choir, meet the people. Greek, Greek, Greek. But, something told me that I should go right away to George Washington University, which had evening classes, for $6.00 a credit. My father was speaking in my ear at all times; education, education. So, I figured I would work in the day time and study in the evening, which I did. I signed up and began my studies on February 1, 1940. Because of my extrovert kind of character, I became almost immediately involved as a soloist in a famous GW Greek chorus 120 voices a cappella, which was once sought after. We performed at Constitution Hall. We did Sibyls. I did the solos and a few other things. Then, I became captain of the college cheerleading squad, even though I worked. Our gym was a thin tabernacle. There wasn't much to do. We didn't have any equipment either, so we had a cheerleading squad. No women. We were responsible for bringing women into the cheerleading squad for the first time in the history of the University. These were Victorian times. When I asked the president for permission to do this, he asked me, "Can you guarantee that the hemline will be six inches below the knee?" What the hell did I know about the hemline? I very cavalierly said, "Oh, sure, no problem." I began to do this, this and this at the university, and became active on the campus. I think I did it because it was attractive and I couldn't do it in New York City. I was alone here, and I had all this to choose. I found that I began to move away from the Greek church and the Greek community, devoting most of my time to the campus and the university itself.

Q: Where were you living?

LAKAS: Boarding room, boarding house, on Decatur Street.

Q: Did you get your own meals there?

LAKAS: No. They had it, and it was rather constraining for me. I had to pay $40.00 a month. Later, I moved to simply a room, up on Emerson Street. I ate at the cafeteria, the one that is closing downtown.

Q: Scholl's.

LAKAS: It was very good. We could also buy a pass for one week on the trolley cars, which was $1.25. You could go anywhere with it. If you had a date, it would probably be at somewhere in the university. After a performance, you would all pile into somebody's car, and go to a Hot Shoppes on Connecticut Avenue. For $1.25, which I had in my pocket, you could get a cheeseburger and an orange freeze.

Q: How about the job? I can't say that it sounds very interesting.

LAKAS: What helped me a great deal was that I took on the job of being the reporter of the division I worked in, to report on what was going on, humorously, etc. That was a pastime. We didn't question work. We worked from 8:00 to 5:00, and Saturdays, half day, also. What we questioned after a while was whether there was something better we could do. I wondered whether I should go down to Panama and work for the Panama Canal Authority. But, after a year, they gave me a promotion to $1,400 a year, from $1,080, working a statistical typing machine, checking the rates that were reported by the rail companies, the trucking companies. I can't tell you. It was bad, but they promoted me to $1,400 a year. Then, they promoted me again to $1,600.

Q: That was good money.

LAKAS: I had gotten interested in the university. I had become very popular on the campus. The Greeks and the war with the Italians played a role in my popularity. I yearned to be a full time student. I asked if my mother and father would come down to Washington and live here with me, which they did, in 1941. It was quite a decision for them to make, because they were leaving behind years and years of neighbors and family, and this and that, to come down to a strange city, just because I was here. They thought maybe I needed them, and I think I did.

Q: What about in these early years, you started in 1939, 1940. How about the war? The war was going on. Was this something you were following? Particularly, being in Washington, did this have an effect on you?

LAKAS: I followed it even in New York City. I'll never forget the night the newspapers came out. It was The Daily News and The Daily Mirror, with headlines this thick. I'm talking about the invasion of Poland.

Q: Four-inch thick headlines.

LAKAS: The invasion of Poland.

Q: This is September 1939.

LAKAS: Thank you. I found it intriguing. I didn't know what war was really like. I had seen movie pictures of World War I, All Quiet On The Western Front. I just had a vague idea what war meant, so I followed it, by virtue of reading the newspapers. That's it, in New York City. When I came down here, I found the city as it must have been in 1936, 1937, 1938. Overnight, in late 1940, when the draft began to be spoken about, I realize there are military people around. I had never seen military people.

Q: They put their uniforms on.

LAKAS: Yes. I couldn't understand what the insignias were that they were wearing. When the draft came into play, we began to notice vacant seats. The boys were being taken away. When we would have our football games... We had a great team in those days, Alphonse "Tuffy" Leemans played for us, and went onto the New York Giants. Over at Griffith Stadium, we saw not only American uniforms up in the stands at Griffith Stadium, but British. Also, if I remember correctly, Polish. All of this was kind of an awakening to something that was happening. Then, the incoming flow of women from everywhere in the United States, to work as secretaries, stenos, and typists, and what have you. We read in the press, The Washington Star that there were G-girls, working and living together, four or five in one apartment. We became aware that accommodations were vanishing. If you got an apartment, you were very, very lucky. That is what I saw. As I moved along with my studies...

Q: What were your studies?

LAKAS: Okay. Initially, English, Spanish, Economics, Accounting, History, and American Government. I delighted in it, and then I got to feeling that I ought to go and serve. Of course, my mom and dad didn't want that. I was an only child. They thought I should get an exemption. I looked around and saw so many that had gone in, in one form or another, I just felt compelled to do the same, not knowing what I was getting into. So, I registered as a volunteer, and went down to Anacostia to take my physical to become a Navy pilot. Don't ask me why, but I was going to be a Navy pilot. I learned that I had astigmatism, so that washed me out of the Air Force. They put me into the deck.

Q: Line officer.

LAKAS: Line officer, yes. The memory I have, which I will never forget, is as I moved onto 1942, I was inducted into active duty, but given a year to complete my studies, whatever they were. The night before leaving for boot camp, we went and serenaded the girls at Strong Hall. The next morning, I found myself on the train, going to boot camp. Several months later, I'm under fire.

Q: Where did you go to boot camp?

LAKAS: Norfolk, Fort Smith.

Q: Was this part of a...

LAKAS: ...Initially, because bodies were coming from everywhere, they put me at Pennsylvania University, allegedly, to continue some study, and to learn how to march. That wasn't very long, because we came out, one night, after having performed as a glee club at the university, there was a list on the bulletin board saying that tomorrow at 0800, I was gone. Lakas will be the commander CEO of this particular group. So, we went on down to Norfolk, and we began the boot camp training. That lasted a month. From there, midshipmen school in Northwestern. That lasted three months. Then, we were commissioned in 1943, in time for me to be assigned to LST210.

Q: That's landing a ship tank.

LAKAS: Yes, exactly, 150 feet long, and about 50 feet, to the beam.

Q: Long, slow target.

LAKAS: Absolutely. Thank you very much. So, I found myself... And I must talk about this, briefly because...

Q: Please do.

LAKAS: These are memories I will never forget. I arrived in Naples, and Mr. Vesuvius had just erupted. It was grim and dark. The enlisted man at the incoming station took my bag and put it in the jeep. We drove to a place beyond Naples. I couldn't see because the dust was so heavy. We went up to a rise, I looked down and I see eight of these LSTs lined up, one after another, just swallowing people and tanks, and this and that. So, I locate 210, and I'm of course, spit and polish.

Q: How did you get across?

LAKAS: The USS Ranger, the old Ranger aircraft carrier. They put us on that at Staten Island, and then we moved into Casablanca. There were still submarines in the Atlantic Ocean at that time. Then, from Casablanca to Bizerte. Others were shipped by a vessel. I, for some reason, was flying an airplane. Ensign Lakas had sparkling shoes, and the tie tucked into the khaki shirt. Everything was spiffy, spiffy, spiffy. I arrived at the door of LST 210 and there is a lieutenant with no tie, shirt is wide open, he is red-eyed and bleary, and there is an enlisted man serving with him. I went up to him and said, "Sir, Ensign Lakas reporting for duty, sir." He looked at me and this most unhappy expression on his face. He turned to the enlisted man, and said, "Jack, take him outside." I was replacing someone who, under fire, hid under a gun pallet. That was my initiation, "Sir, Ensign Lakas, USMR, reporting for duty, sir." Let me tell you, I got to be like him pretty quickly.

Q: What were you doing? I mean, what were you up to at that point?

LAKAS: We left that night at 2000, in a convoy of 10 LSTs, to go up to Anzio, which I learned was a ferrying process. We would load 34th division, or 45th division, tanks and what have you, and get there about 3:30 in the morning. If the Germans were nice, they would let us in peace, or they would shoot at us with 88s, from the top of the hill. We would offload and get the hell out of there as fast as possible.

Q: This is at the time of the Anzio beachhead?

LAKAS: It went on and on for about two months. As I was told, we had it in our laps the first night we came in there, but we didn't follow up with troops. Rome was just a few miles beyond Anzio. Some of those ships were hit. Some of the German tanks came down from the beachhead. There was always give and take, back and forth. We would never find the same U.S. team behind the sandbags where we would land, on another trip. It would be changing, and there would be wounded. That was my first experience.

Q: What was your position?

LAKAS: Gunnery officer, 40 millimeter, forward tuck. That was the gun that usually was unable, most of the time.

Q: 40 millimeter; what was this like?

LAKAS: It was a long barrel, four or two, we had four. Besides, it would be the 20 millimeter Eriocaulon, machine-gun type thing. But, we had the 40 millimeter, with it's fire shells about this size.

Q: We're talking about six or seven inches long.

LAKAS: Yes. I recall that my first experience was near death. My godmother had given me a medallion for my baptismal protection. I saw an empty shell coming toward me, from our gun, and I simply bent over to kick it away. When you're under fire, you don't think about too many things. You're carried by this huge wave. It takes you wherever that wave wants to go. You don't' think about fear. You see those faces coming out at you, and you say in the beginning, "Somebody is going to get hurt out here." So, I bent over and kicked the shell over. I got up and felt my chain was loose. So, I looked down, and the medallion had been shot off. The two ends were hanging without the medallion. Strangely, enough, I didn't feel anything about it. I just thought, "Doggone it, there goes that nice medallion my godmother gave me." The second campaign was when we finished with Anzio...

Q: Just to nail this down, you were bringing in fresh troops, fresh supplies, and taking out wounded, that sort of thing?

LAKAS: Yes, and supplies, of course. My memory of that was every other night; hit Naples, Anzio, Naples, Anzio, and it was watching with sorrow, the army climbing down the side of the ship. If it was stormy and windy, the ship would be heaving up and down, and the small boats to which they landed, would do the same thing. I watched these kids heaving up. I thought to myself, "Lord, thank you." I've got a bunk and when Thanksgiving comes around, I get a turkey. There is plenty to eat. If I were hit by a torpedo, we would go down very quickly. It was an empty shell of a ship. That's it. But, I felt really sorry for the 34th and 45th. It wasn't just enough getting off the ship into the small boat, but going into the beach, you would find obstacles. On top of that, the small boat could be hit. You could wipe out the entire group in the small boat. We had eight of these boats that we carried on our ship, and we would use them for the rain.

Q: You weren't moving into the shore and putting down your ramp?

LAKAS: No. We would go ashore later when it was under control by our people. Most of the landing took place in the water. We had an anchor in the rear, the stern anchor. That would pull us away. Later, when the beach master would say, "Under control," then we would go into the beach and ride up onto it. We would open the doors, and the tanks would roll off. The men would march off as well. That was the best kind of landing. Then, we had to take Elba, because it was only five miles away from the Italian coast, and the Germans were shooting across the water, picking up our troops as well. So, we took that, the Moroccan troops. We lost one small boat. Then, we were spared Normandy. The gossip was that we were going into Greece. They took some of our ships to Southampton. The rest of us went into southern France, with the Texas, West Virginia, and one other battleship.

Q: These were older battleships.

LAKAS: These had been raised from the muck of Pearl Harbor and reconstructed.

Q: And turned into gun platforms.

LAKAS: Oh, oh. Here comes this monster. We are rattling along at five knots. Here comes this monster. They've got movie pictures on the ship, they have beer, and all the great things you can think of. Here we were in our little boat. We serve on a ship like that. We had our laundry out in the back stern. Anyway, they were great. We went into St. Tropez, and we took that. It took two days to hit a shelf of German rangers. Then, we cleared the place for Marseilles. We took Marseilles. That opened up the southern part. The next big campaign was the Bulge, December 1944.

Q: By the way, I have to put a historical comment in here. At one point, when you were doing this, when Churchill was full of grand plans, and he was complaining about something... I can't remember exactly. He said, "I find that everything depends on something called an LST," because there was a shortage of LSTs. Churchill's grandiose plans were continually thwarted because there weren't enough LSTs to do this. He got quite annoyed at this.

LAKAS: They were launching them by the dozen on the Mississippi River, sideways. They got brief training in Solomon's Island, down here in Maryland. Let me tell you, that was quite a chore. The boys in the Pacific took a beating as well. Anyway, we took Marseilles, and then the Bulge occurred. We went to Leghorn to pick up Japanese American outfit.

Q: 442nd?

LAKAS: That's right. They landed, and then we brought in Algerian troops. They landed, and the Bulge was taken care of. The next thing I know, I was transferred. They told me in April, on the day Roosevelt died. When I saw the flag at half mast in Naples... I was being transshipped to the old SS America, I said to myself, "Somebody is going to get it, because they didn't raise the flag full mast," because I didn't know he died. When they told me he died, the first thing I thought was, "What are we going to do now?" That's how great this man was. So, I went to the U.S., 30 days leave, Pearl Harbor, on one of the staffs who were preparing for the landing at Kagoshima Bay. We had taken measurements for our submarines. I was assigned to one of the staffs to prepare for the landing on Kagoshima Bay. The other staffs were preparing for the landings north of Tokyo, and other staffs were working on Sasebo, Nagasaki, the Hiroshima side. We were working the southern part of Hiroshima Bay. The comparison I can make about how we felt was the European theater did not seem as threatening to us on the LSTs. We became very nervous about meeting the Japanese.

Q: The Kamikazes and all that.

LAKAS: That's right. We estimated that the casualty rate would be one million. So, in our vanguard, as we left to go to Japan, were three hospital ships. It was the fifth marine corps, or whatever, and it was huge and modern. A week out of Kagoshima Bay, we heard that atomic bombs had been dropped. Then, we heard that the Japanese had surrendered. Our group was told to go to Sasebo. It was dawn, and we didn't know what to expect. It was a narrow entrance at Pearl Harbor, and we very carefully moved in, and it opened up to a huge harbor. To our astonishment, there were destroyers, swinging back and forth on the buoys, there were submarines that had hangars for airplanes on their decks. So, we finally moved in, and established our own headquarters. We were under orders not to fraternize, if we saw any Japanese. So, that's what happened. Later, I was assigned to go down to Guam to become the executive officer of a small LCI, landing ship infantry, to deal with diehard Japanese troops that would refuse to believe that there had been a surrender. So, we had some difficult times. We carried lots of rice, and persuaded a number of them to surrender, and others committed suicide. It was different from Europe.

Q: Yes. In the first place, when you went into Kagoshima Bay, were you still the gunnery officer?

LAKAS: Yes. No, no, not gunnery officer. I was a staff officer for communications on the captain's staff, that had been preparing for a month or so.

Q: Well now, when you went in, at first the place seemed deserted. But, the Japanese must have started coming out.

LAKAS: They did. About a week later. Japan is kind of mountainous, and so behind Sasebo, which is the part we were in, they went up very quickly. First, the men came down, then subsequently we saw women. But, we couldn't fraternize with them.

Q: There must have been problems feeding the people, weren't there, or was that taken care of by somebody else?

LAKAS: I have no knowledge of this. We were confined to our LST, tied up to the dock, receiving telegrams, and what have you, to be passed on to headquarters. Once in a while, we would take the jeep and go down to the supply ship and pick up supplies for our ship. Beyond that, we were not aware, actually, with what was going on with the internal politics. We were aware that MacArthur was in Tokyo. We were aware that there was a major surrender ceremony aboard the Missouri, but we didn't have a feel for the dynamics at play within the population themselves. I'm sure they had been told by their government that they should be aware of us, that we were this, and we were that. I didn't see any of that. I finished my one month and was immediately assigned to this LCI in Guam.

Q: What were you doing? How does one go around trying to persuade these diehards to surrender?

LAKAS: We had government officers on board who spoke Japanese. We would go down to the beach with lots of food, and we would meet with the commanding person of the garrison. Through him, we would attempt to explain that the surrender had actually taken place. We left it up to him to move in to the interior with his garrison, to bring the others out. We were not involved in any military strikes. We were concerned that they might turn on us. So, we would move out from the beach at night, and anchor in the harbor, making sure that boats were not approaching us at all times. I don't really know exactly how it was done, how many they brought in. All I know is we would report that we had arrived at Kapingamarangi, Wallis, and a couple other islands. The staff would go on to Japan, but then we would send down bigger ships to either help transport the Japanese to the homeland, or to do whatever they did. That also was done in China 16 times in size. That went on for about six months. Even after the war had ended for some time, they were still finding Japanese hiding in the jungles of Guam.

Q: I'm not sure about there, but in the Philippines, and other places, they had people showing up 10 years later, 20 years later. It was incredible.

LAKAS: So, I was transported back to the states in April 1946. I came home and my mom didn't know, because we weren't sure how I was getting to Washington from San Francisco. We were lucky to get a train. I stayed up three nights, and three days. I got to Washington and hailed a cab. I went to my home at 2315 Lincoln Road, NE, and walked up the steps and knocked on the door. My mother opened up the door, and she behaved as if I had just gone down the street to get some popcorn or something; the Spartan attitude. My father was different. He went bananas. I ought to insert one anecdote here. When I was leaving for the Pacific, I went home to say goodbye to my mom, my dad was working. There were no tears. She said, "Be careful." I said goodbye to her, and walked down the steps. There was a cab waiting. He was an African-American, and suddenly I saw this face become virtually white. It was staring over my shoulder. As I looked around, there's my mother with a 45. I had forgotten it upstairs. It was my 45. She came running down with it, because she thought I needed it. The driver didn't know if my mom was competent. I said, "Mom, just give me the gun. I'm sorry, I forgot it." She said, "Oh, I knew you needed it, and so I brought it down to you." The driver didn't recover for about three hours. But, that's the kind of insert I wanted to make on that one.

Q: I do want to ask, you had lived in New York in a diverse neighborhood, where everybody got along, how did you find Washington? I mean, the racial divide between the blacks and the whites?

LAKAS: I found it bad. I thought it was bad in New York, but in New York, it was kind of camouflaged. You had large spaces, you had Harlem. You had other places, such as Queens. It was kind of camouflaged, but here it was wide open. You could see signs that said, "Colored only," and "Whites only." Glen Echo, for example, the same thing. But, if you ask me what my reaction was, I didn't have any real spiritual reaction. I came here for a job, and I was intent on the job. I was intent on taking care of myself for the first time, alone. I had church, and GW. In a sense, I think I can attribute this lack of response to a degree of immaturity, and to a degree, not having been associated openly with the problem. But, it was very severe here. I remember charlie cars, conductors and motor men, "White only." Elevator operators at the federal buildings were African-Americans. Places like O'Donnell's, that was on E Street.

Q: A famous fish restaurant.

LAKAS: African-Americans service. If you were lucky enough to have somebody drive you down to Maryland, to Lexington, or whatever, you would see areas that were black only. But, it virtually passed me by. It wasn't until I got overseas as a junior Foreign Service officer, I decided to become aware, because I could hear it from overseas from the United States.

Q: How was it in the Navy?

LAKAS: All white crews except in the pantry, the officers ward room, maybe down in the lower part of the...

Q: Engine room?

LAKAS: Not even the engine room, I think you found them where the food is served.

Q: Stewards, really.

LAKAS: Right. But, they had positions when general corps were hit. They had positions to go to. They were gunnery positions.

Q: I was going to say, as a gunnery officer, you must have found that you had blacks under your command.

LAKAS: Yes I did. I saw no different. They were very, very good. I had an experience once, when we were bringing back Algerian troops to help out with the Bulge problem. It was a two night trip from Algeria to Marseilles. The Algerian troops preferred to sit on the top deck. There were cut lambs to cook their own meal. All night long after that, they would be sharpening their swords, up and down, up and down. I noticed the African-Americans looking at this, and saying things like, "Man, look at those goums."

Q: The term was goums?

LAKAS: Yes, "g - o - u - m - s." I don't know where it came from. I may have missed a few things here, but I think we can go on.

Q: All right. Good. Well then, you're back in 1946.

LAKAS: Yes.

Q: Did you know what you wanted to do? Did you have any feel for anything?

LAKAS: I went straight to the university, within 24 hours.

Q: This is Washington?

LAKAS: George Washington University. Under the GI bill, I signed up to complete my degree, a BA in government, which I was able to do in one year. My objectives as a returned veteran were (1) get a degree, a piece of paper that would open a door, I thought; (2) marry, (3) get a good job. This was a job, in my subconscious, that would correspond to what I was doing aboard ship, commanding people. I was lucky to get a job for $40 a week.

Q: Did you have a serious girlfriend at this point?

LAKAS: I had been corresponding with a number, but toward 1945, I began to correspond with the lady I married. She came from New Milford, Connecticut, lived in New Milford, near Danbury. We married December 15th. December 15th seems to be my lucky day. December 15 is our anniversary. We married in New Milford, Connecticut. We had a Greek priest and a congregationalist.

Q: This 194_?

LAKAS: 1946. That was a big year for me. She came down to Washington with me. We got into one room, at $75 a month. Again, I couldn't find a job that suited me. I was unhappy as all get out. I did some writing for the American Trucking Association. I did some deliveries for a dairy company called Richfield Dairy. I was married and I had to make a living. I was very unhappy.

Q: What was the background of your wife? How did you meet her?

LAKAS: When I came into Washington from Europe, I had 30 days leave, and I intended to have a great time with the ladies I knew from my old days at the university. I had another one waiting for me in San Francisco. I was quite popular. My father said to me, a few days after I arrived, "We're going to Bridgeport, Connecticut." I said, "Why?" "Well, your cousin is about to marry a real nice Greek boy out there from New Milford. We are going up to pay our respects." I said, "Dad, I have so many days left here, and I'm fighting a war. You want me to go up to Bridgeport?" "Yes, you're going to Bridgeport." So, we did... authority. We met the fiancï¿½e. I thought this would be a day's trip, and I would be back in Washington again. That night, the fiancï¿½e said, "Oh, let's go up to New Milford and meet my family." I said, "How far away is New Milford?" He said, "Seventy-five miles." "Well, can I get a train from there to go back to New York." He said, "Maybe you can, and maybe you can't." So, I swallowed hard, and off we went to New Milford in a car. We met the boy's parents and they had a banquet for us. It was VE day, and it was grim. It was raining heavily. I kept looking out there and saying to myself, "What kind of a life is this? I've seen combat, and I've seen death, and here I am in New Milford." I was so bored, I decided to go into the kitchen to see what two girls were doing, the daughters. I struck up a conversation with one of them; my wife to be. I said, "Do you go to New York very often?" She said, "Yes, I do." I said, "Would you like to meet me in New York and go to Greenwich Village, and do a little dancing and eating?" That's how it all began. For a year afterwards, I kept saying, "I'm not the marrying kind." "Here's my lieutenant JG pin, just carry it... I'm not the marrying kind." Then, I would say, "Here's my fraternity pin, CJE, I'm not the marrying kind." Then, I would give her a negater ring, and say, "It's just something for you to have." Then, when I was at the altar in December, I asked myself what the hell I was doing at the altar. How did I get there? That's how it all took place.

Q: I still tell my wife that I don't recall proposing. Women get what they want.

LAKAS: Yes, indeed.

Q: So, you're at this stage. We're moving toward 1947, aren't we? You are married and...

LAKAS: Yes, halfway through my first year of marriage, the Navy calls and says, "Coming back to reserve duty?" which pleased me. I was hoping to make full lieutenant. So, I borrowed my wife's car and drove down to Norfolk. They assigned me to the USS Albany cruiser. This was fantastic; compared to an LSD. So, we're on there, and training. We were training all right. I had some time off, and I went down to the gulf deck and looked at the gulf stream, which was such a beautiful blue. This voice said to me, "It's very beautiful, isn't it?" I said, "Yes, it is." He said, "Hi, I'm Everett Bellows." I said, "I'm Nick Lakas, and I came down from Washington in my wife's car. I'll be glad to take you back to Washington. Let's go and do some shopping in Hamilton to take our photographs," which we did. He said to me, "When you have the photographs, come and see me." He gave me an address. I got back to Washington. I forgot about the invitation. I got the pictures. Things were getting so bad with jobs for me, that in desperation, one afternoon, I said, "The hell with this. I'll go see Everett Bellows and give him his photograph, and just take the day off." So, I came down here, and I see something called The State Department. I walk in and I say to the guard, "I need to see Mr. Everett Bellows, I have some things of his." He says, "Just go down here to the right, you'll see a sign." I did. It was a huge office, with a lot of secretaries. One of them said, "Do you have an appointment?" I said, "No, I just came here to see Mr. Bellows." They said, "You can't see him unless you have an appointment." I thought, "Oh, big stuff here." I said, "Well, give him the photographs, and say hello for me, I'll leave." I turn around to walk toward the exit, and he comes out of his office and sees me. It was a big reunion. He says, "Come on in." I walk in and I see a sign on his desk that says, "Everett Bellows, Director General, Foreign Service." What do you think of that?

Q: Oh, yes.

LAKAS: I still didn't know what I was looking at. I hadn't the slightest idea where I was, way out of my reach. I just came down to give him the photographs. He ordered some sandwiches, and said, "How are you doing? What's going on?" I said, "What do you do here?" "Well, I'm running the Foreign Service." I said, "What is the Foreign Service." He said, "It's a diplomatic corps. We get personnel. We are having a rough time at this moment, because we only have 200 career Foreign Service officers, and we are very short-staffed. We've got Truman plans, Marshall plan, GI prize; name it. We have five or six programs, but we don't have the staff. I said, "Oh, that's too bad." Then, he said, "Do you want to serve?" He said, "You speak a couple languages, don't you?" I said, "Yes, I do." He said, "Do you like to travel?" "Oh, I'm newly married, and I like to keep my slippers under my bed." He said, "No, that's not for you, we need you." He said, "Oh, you would be issuing visas." "What's a visa?" That's how that began. He said, "Come on, raise your right hand and take the oath of office." So, I did. This was incredible.

Q: Yes, it really is.

LAKAS: It was incredible. He said, "You're going to study at the institute for one month." I said, "What institute?" He said, "The Foreign Service Institute, down here." "Your wife will be given training for a month, and you're going to be put on the SS America," which was the old transport ship that brought me here.

Q: It had been called the Westpoint.

LAKAS: Very good, the Westpoint. He said that this would take me to my destination, Southampton. Then, after that, you're going to Glasgow. I said, "Where is that?" He said, "It's in Scotland." I said, "Oh, Scotland, very nice." You'll report for duty, and your salary will be $4,000 a year, which was a big jump from whatever it was. I picked up the phone, and called my wife and said, "Sweetheart, pack up, we're going places." She thought I was referring to visiting her parents in New Milford. She said, "Why do I need to pack up?" I said, "We're going to Glasgow." She said, "Where is that?" I said, "Scotland." That is how my career began, as a Foreign Service staff officer, FSS 11. Do you remember those numbers?

Q: Oh, yes.

LAKAS: We packed up one suitcase, two trunks. That is all we had. We got on the America, arrived in South Hampton. Ed Coleman of the administrative office in London picked us up. We stayed overnight, and then they put us on a train, the Royal Scot, and it took eight hours to get to Glasgow.

Q: There you are. Well, this is probably a good place to stop. I put at the end where we are. We have just taken you through your career. You have arrived as an FSS 11, staff officer 11. You have just arrived in Glasgow in 1948.

LAKAS: February 1948.

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Q: Today is March 11, 2002. Nick, we're at 1948, Glasgow. What was it like there at that point?

LAKAS: We landed from Southampton from the SS America, and stayed overnight in London. We were put on the express train to Glasgow. It took us eight hours to reach Glasgow. We got there at dusk. We disembarked, and out of the mist, there appeared a young man who looked at us very carefully and said, "You are Americans?" I said, "Yes, we are." He said, "My name is Warren Kelsey of the consulate general in Glasgow, welcome." That's how it started. He put us in a cab and came with us to a boarding house, where he had been staying. We stayed there for perhaps a month or two, until we found rental quarters. The following day, we reported to the consul general. He was Dale C. McDonough, a terrific guy, who was a great leader. I was introduced to him. Within two hours, I found myself handling shipping, and shipping manifests. I was taking care of seamen, who came in on American freighters. They were having problems of one kind or another, medical or whatever. I did that for about two months. The next thing I knew I was reassigned to do visas.

Q: Let's talk a little about the shipping and all, and sailors. Glasgow being a major city, I would think that American sailors could really find a lot of trouble.

LAKAS: Yes they did. The Clyde River was a great place for them to come into, to offload their cargo. It was quite a busy place. The problems we had, generally, were misconduct, and sometimes their papers were not in order. On top of that, we had to check the manifest on the cargo they were taking, and the cargo they were offloading. They would have to come in in those days and pick up their clearances from us at the office, or I would be summoned down to the ship by the captain to officiate some problem they had.

Q: Signing seamen off.

LAKAS: That's right, exactly, and getting them back on the plane. If they were ill, we would have to put them in a hospital, if they required hospitalization. We had to make sure they got the greatest care possible. After that, when they were released, we put them on a train to London, where the shipping people in the embassy took over from there.

Q: How did the British police deal with the seamen?

LAKAS: From the very outset, I was very impressed with their civility, their memory of our alliance during the war, and their willingness to overlook a few things here and there, so long as the consulate was involved in making sure this would not happen again.

Q: Get the people out.

LAKAS: It meant less concern for them. It worked out very well.

Q: I must say that this is a great tool of the consular officer, by saying, "If you stay here, it's a problem for you, it's a problem for me, if you go, it's a problem for people back in the United States."

This is tape two, side one, with Nick Lakas.

LAKAS: I was going to say to you that the superintendent of police was a very good friend of the consul general. He participated in our receptions. He made sure he was with us. When he asked us for assistance, relevant to some of the things they had to do, and which we could be helpful, we assisted. There was a rapport there that was absolutely enormous. Every time one of us arrived or left, we sent a note to the superintendent letting them know we had arrived or were leaving for a post. You know that from your own experience.

Q: Well, then, you moved to the visa side of things. What was the visa situation like?

LAKAS: We had visas, and we had immigration. On the immigration side, we had applications; many of them from the private sector of Scotland. The labor party had come into power in England at that time. The middle-class Scots saw fit to go elsewhere. We had also the Polish Free Army; General Anders. They were accommodated in Scotland. They too wanted to have visas to go to the states. From there, we were never sure of their background. We had to worry about tuberculosis. We had to be concerned about communist background.

Q: With the Polish people, I imagine that a lot were being sponsored by Polish organizations; particularly in Chicago, and the Midwest. Was this true or not?

LAKAS: I don't remember the sponsoring affidavits. All I know is there would be a huge pile on my desk that needed to be reviewed. We tried to do it as quickly as we possibly could. We had an excellent medical staff of Scottish medical people, helping us with that too. But, I don't remember where the supporting affidavits came from.

Q: What about war brides?

LAKAS: Yes. Under the GI Bill, we had a number of those. I think in the first year and a half, the bulk of the applications came to me, and after that, it sort of trailed off. But, it was a very essential element of the work I did in the visa section. We had to examine x-rays, along with everything we did. It was the old style visa.

Q: When you say you had to examine x-rays, did you look at them yourself?

LAKAS: Yes, I did. I was taught where to look for spots. It was really a cursory examination, just to make sure that (1) the x-rays were there; (2) they seemed reasonably clear, and there was some document appended to them by a doctor saying that things were fine.

Q: What about non-immigrant visas? Did you have a problem with people who were going to stay? This was at a time when people were getting a little tired of the British Isles, the citizens there. This was a difficult time.

LAKAS: In the beginning, it was not a paramount issue to us, so long as there was some observance of law, at that time, when it existed. We went ahead and did a minimum amount of interviewing for the Scots visitors. They was a preference for the British Isles, and for Germany, and western Europe. It was later when we had the McCarran Act passed.

Q: That was around 1955, 1956. No, it was 1954, I think.

LAKAS: We had to take a much more stringent look at the non-immigrant people.

Q: Was there a problem on immigrant visas with screening out prostitutes, particularly if it was a GI marriage?

LAKAS: Well, there was a clause, if I can recall what it was, of derogatory conduct. I think this is what it referred to. The police were very good at giving us the screening needed for all the visas. I can't remember at this moment, because it was so long ago, as to the number that we uncovered. I don't think it was a serious problem, or else I would have remembered what was going on.

Q: Well, what about life in Glasgow at this time? In 1948, they had a bad winter. In a way, the food situation, living situation, was worse than during war time.

LAKAS: We were very impressed with the courage, the stamina, the endurance of the Scots. Throughout the business of rationing, everything was rationed, including chocolates. We at the consulate were part of the rationing program. Meat was very difficult to obtain. But, eventually, we at the consulate were able to work through the embassy, in London, to use the commissary, not only for food, but for liquor that we needed for our receptions. The Scots themselves were very hospitable, very warm, very responsive. They seemed to feel that they would go slow on reconstruction, to make the work last longer. They were concerned about a depression coming in, or an economic recession. When we went to Italy, during 1949, on the holiday, we were astonished to see how quickly the Italians had covered up the craters, and were rebuilding. They had destroyed buildings in Naples and elsewhere. But, the labor aspect in Great Britain gave us the feeling that the word was, "Take your time."

Q: Was there the feeling among the people at the consulate general about a certain unhappiness with the labor situation? I'm not speaking about the party as much as the unions, and all that?

LAKAS: Yes. Are you speaking, people, officers of the consulate, or the local employees?

Q: Well, I mean, both.

LAKAS: We simply reported that, as you just described. That the unions were really becoming a headache in the recovery process. The locals in our office would joke about this. As they joked about all the frailties of their lives, under the war system. But, basically, yes, this is why there was a surge for immigration visas from the Scots. They saw their opportunity as being elsewhere.

Q: Well, for the next four or five decades... I'm talking about the labor movement, the unions, were sort of considered to be the British sickness. It impeded everything. Margaret Thatcher came in and knocked that out.

LAKAS: That is what I remember. You're correct. This is the talk that went on. I think the report that went out of the consulate, down to the embassy, conveyed the view from Glasgow. We also had a consulate in Edinburgh. We could see copies of that, and it was the same thing coming out of Edinburgh.

Q: Well, between Edinburgh and Glasgow... Edinburgh being sort of the intellectual capital, and Glasgow being the working capital of Scotland (this is in very rough terms.) Did you feel that there was a competition? Did you pick up anything?

LAKAS: Between the two cities or between the two offices?

Q: Between the two offices.

LAKAS: No. We never felt that. We sort of envied our consulate in Edinburgh for being in such a lovely area. Our consul general would sometimes be assigned by the embassy in London to go and relieve the consul there while he was on home leave. He would invite us to come and tour Edinburgh. There was a nice rapport. Henry Day was then the consul

Q: What about life for you and your wife in Glasgow.

LAKAS: We were newly married, virtually still on our honeymoon. She took to Glasgow like a duck takes to water. She was not particularly comfortable with the dampness. She liked the Scotswomen and they liked her a great deal. There would be articles in the newspaper about Eleanor's dress, Eleanor doing this, Eleanor doing that, written by women journalists. We would invite a number of them to our home for Thanksgiving, and they would help us do the turkey. It was that kind of rapport. I admired my wife for doing that. They saw her as a genuine, New Milford, Connecticut girl. It was our first experience outside the country.

Q: I'm sure it was a very positive one, wasn't it?

LAKAS: Yes it was. I stood there and was very pleased. I was very much in demand, and very popular.

Q: Were you doing visas, more or less, after that?

LAKAS: Yes. The three- year tour of duty included shipping at first. Then, the rest of the time, visa work. The consul general would occasionally come in to me and say, "I would like you to go and cover the agricultural exhibit, and I want you to give me a report of what you see there. We want to send it to the Department of Agriculture." Of course, I found it humorous, which he didn't know. I'm a New York City kid, and what I knew about agriculture, you could put in a peanut bag. In fact, I didn't know the difference between a bull and a cow. I would go over and do the best I could. He was quite pleased with this. Then, he would come in some other time and say, "I would like you to go and attend this function, where Robeson is going to appear."

Q: Robeson, being the...?

LAKAS: The singer.

Q: Paul Robeson.

LAKAS: They wanted me to give my view on what the reaction of the crowd was, and what was being said. Then, he would also come in from time to time and say, "I would like you to drive me to Burns country. I'm invited to attend a rotary truck meeting, and I would like you to drive. You can attend the meeting, too." Out of all the officers, and there were seven of us, I thought that sometimes he would reach out for me, because he thought maybe I was dependable. The greatest memory I have is when he asked me one day who was going to be the duty officer for Saturday. I said, "I am, Sir." He said, "Fine, we have some legal matters to attend to. You'll get a call from me." That call was really camouflaged for his marriage to an American lady he had known at the Department of State, who came over for the wedding. The wedding took place in the registrar's office of Glasgow. He turned to me and said, "Can I borrow your wedding ring?" I said, "Certainly." It was a great memory. When I became principal officer in Cork Island the following assignment, he actually came with his bride to pay his respects, to a man very junior to him.

Q: You mentioned Paul Robeson. Did you get involved in following the communist party, and Glasgow being a working area, I would suspect it would have a fairly strong party in those days.

LAKAS: Not me. The political officer probably was doing that. It was difficult to dodge the Poles. They would come running up to you at your residence and ask for an appointment to speak with you about their problems at the camp they were staying in, and how things were "going on" in the camp that ought to be known by us. I would dutifully take down what was being said, in respect to the office, and pass it onto the political officer. What they did with it, I have no idea. But, I was in no position to play the role of political officer.

Q: You had the impression that it was a fairly strong party there.

LAKAS: Yes there was. I didn't know exactly what was going on. This was all new to me. But, I'm aware that we had coverage.

Q: 1948 was sort of a critical year, as far as the Cold War was concerned. You had the coup in Czechoslovakia, and the Berlin airlift, I believe, was going on at that time. Things were cranking up, the Soviet Union was seen in quite a different way, in 1948, on. Was this all impacting what the consulate was doing?

LAKAS: I personally had some peripheral feeling for what was going on. I didn't know exactly what we were doing about it. I was in one room, dealing only with visas. My desk was loaded with visas cases to be studied. I saw suddenly the arrival of a USIS officer from London to take up station with us. I saw the political officer, David Ness, active in certain instances, but I did not know totally just exactly what was going on. I had my hands full, just handling the visa cases. I would hear things, but I didn't know exactly.

Q: Were you getting anything from the family about the Civil War in Greece at this time?

LAKAS: The letters we received from home made some references to the Civil War, but they were not extensive references. I saw in the local newspapers in Glasgow, about the British and the Americans coming into Greece. We had a radio that was able to pick up USA and Greece as well. I would tune in at 11:00 at night to try to pick up BBC news, for example, going to Greece. But, I have no real knowledge of it.

Q: Then, in 1951, you would have moved?

LAKAS: September 1950.

Q: 1950. By the way, although you were a staff officer, you certainly were getting what one could call an FSO-line type work, weren't you?

LAKAS: Absolutely. I can't tell you how both Glasgow and Cork gave me a platform to launch myself into the essential career of an FSO. Later on, when the Wriston Program came in, and we were transferred to the career side of the State Department, we were more than prepared to undertake the FSO duties. Yes. Being sent to Cork in 1950, primarily to handle interrogations of a case that was pending, the idea, at that time, was for me to finish those and then go on home for reassignment. Cork was really temporarily, but it turned out it became permanent, for three years.

Q: So you went to Cork, and you were there from 1950 to 1953?

LAKAS: Exactly. I became the principal officer of the Cork office in 1951.

Q: In the first place, you were sent to do a case. What was the case?

LAKAS: There was a suit in the United States. The person who was being sued had taken refuge in Ireland. He was of Irish background. The lawyers had asked the State Department... and had given them a list of questions. As for us, at the consulate, it was our job to get this man into the office, to sit down and reply to those questions.

Q: It was a deposition.

LAKAS: A deposition. Then, we sent that back to Washington. What was done with the case I have no idea, but we did what we were required to.

Q: How big was the post in Cork?

LAKAS: Enormous. If you're talking about the physical size, we were at 32 South Mall Street in Cork. We were above the Bank of Ireland. We had three floors, and the top floor had been the residence of a consul in days gone by. For a long, long, time, Cork and Cobh, where it used to be, were one of the principal exits for the Irish immigrants to the United States from 1848. The old record books were still in the safe, in Spenserian penmanship. Each one was detailed as to how many boarded the clipper ship this, and the clipper ship that, by name. Later, it became a focus for the handling of social security checks being sent to Irish Americans who had been in the states, resolving the estate cases, dealing with visas, immigrant and non-immigrant, but eventually immigrant visas were given to the embassy in Dublin. We just handled non-working visas. There was the matter of American citizenship. If you voted, at that time, in the local election, we were deprived of American citizenship. There were a number of cases where we had to deal with that. We had American seamen. It was the first time I saw the power of the Catholic church.

Q: Oh, yes.

LAKAS: I would be summoned by the Archbishop at 7:00 or 8:00 at night, up to his palace, and he would say, "We have a concern here. I would like this person out of here by tomorrow morning." It wasn't Lord Mayor speaking to me, and it wasn't the president up in Dublin, it was the Archbishop.

Q: Would this be an American who was causing trouble?

LAKAS: Yes.

Q: Things have changed a lot. How would you get rid of someone? How would you move an American citizen who was trouble making or maybe getting involved with the wife of a...

LAKAS: Or molesting a nun.

Q: Oh, yes. They did to a nun what shouldn't be done. How would you get rid of them?

LAKAS: With the police, we would apprehend the man. They would hold them in temporary custody. They would hear from the Archbishop's office also. Then, we would escort them to Shannon Airport, and put them onboard the plane. We would alert the police in New York City, to make sure he got off the plane, and went on his way. Of course, he was on the black list almost immediately.

Q: There wasn't any, "I want my lawyer."

LAKAS: He knew he was guilty, or whatever. He had to get out of there as fast as possible.

Q: How many people were involved in our consulate?

LAKAS: I was the sole American officer, FSS-10, at that time. There were six, very fine Irish employees, local. That was it. We handled tons of work, particularly the beneficiaries of veterans payments, social security payments, millions of dollars coming in through our pouches, every other week, which we simply put into the local mail. If we found American citizens incarcerated in institutions for the insane, for example, if we got word of it, I would go down personally to see what the situation was. Eventually, I would inform the family, or make sure they came over and took him back to the states. If a person died in the county of Muenster, we would collect his belongings, and seal the casket, and send it back to the states. I would get called down to make speeches, for example, to the Irish Countrywoman's Association, in some backward village. My theme, generally, for the speech I delivered, was to focus on the miracle of the United States; this diversity which lead to unity. They were very, very eager. I just returned from Ireland Sunday. I attended a conference. That hospitality, that feeling for America is still very, very strong. You can do no wrong.

Q: Did you feel the embassy in Dublin breathing down your neck?

LAKAS: No. They were very good at that time. They gave me the feeling of being semi-autonomous. I could report directly to Washington, with a copy to them. I was able to persuade Ambassador Matthews to come down and pay an official visit for the first time, in a long time, to the city of Cork, Ireland's second city. There was a good rapport between us. I would be summoned to Dublin to participate in a country team meeting. They would do it, say at 3:00 in the afternoon, and they would tell me they would want me up there by 6:00 that afternoon. Our people would call the railway people and say, "Mr. Lakas has to go to Dublin, would you kindly hold the express until he gets onboard?" That was the kind of rapport we had, "Hold the express!"

Q: When you were there, did the troubles in northern Ireland have any resonance where you were?

LAKAS: It was very peaceful. They hardly touched on the subject. They would talk about the troubles of 22, more they talked about Cromwell.

Q: Oliver Cromwell, yes.

LAKAS: That's right. But, aside from that, it was a very peaceful, semi-rural second city of Ireland. It had a great port. All the big time steamers stopped in Cove. There was transportation to England, and vice versa, from Cork itself. One of our actions has lead to the creation of the international airport at Cork. That was because we had our very first visit by an American destroyer. I guess it was 1952. One of the sailors that the captain thought had been malingering, turned out to be a real case of appendicitis, dying. So, we rushed him off to Ban Say Core Hospital. The nun said they didn't think he had a chance to live. I said in my full brash New York attitude toward the world at that time, "He's going to live, because I said so." Stupidity, first-class. He did live. How do we get him out of there? He was still in a very precarious position. So, I called the embassy in Dublin, and they said, "Well, maybe we'll call the embassy in London. Do you have a place for a C-47 to land?" I said, "Certainly, it's a sheet metal, up at the top of the hill." They said, "You better be sure of what you're talking about Nick, because this could mean your career. Just be sure of what you're doing here." I said, "No, I have assurances from the Lord Mayor and other authority that this is a place where a C-47 can land." So, the next day, everything has been arranged, and the sock was put up to determine the wind. Here comes a C-47, circles the field once, circles it another time, and comes down and stops within 50 feet of the fence. The pilot gets out of the plane and says, "Who is the son-of-a-bitch that brought us in here?" I said, "I'm the consul, sir." "Oh, sir." We put him onboard the plane, and I've been receiving a card from him every year, from Maine.

Q: With all these social security checks coming and other federal benefits of one kind or another, did you find yourself going out and investigating, and making sure that the money was being spent properly, or that the person was indeed entitled to it?

LAKAS: We would spot check twice a year. We would pull names out of a hat. Never did we find, in the three years I was there, a malfeasance. They went to a spot, they stayed there; it was their home, their family in some backward village (backward, in the sense of geographically), but beyond that, we never had any problems.

Q: How about the man who went to the United States, was on the police force in New York City, for 25, 30 years, got a pension, and came back. Did they fit in? I served in Germany, and the Germans who came back had a problem. They were full of American "piss and vinegar." It didn't go over well in the small doffs in Germany.

LAKAS: In the 1950s, it was easier for them to go back and fit into the old country, because our country still had not moved up. There was very little difference from when they left Ireland, in the 1940s, and what they found later in Ireland. The difference began to be seen, as I'm told, as you got into the 1960s and 1970s. But, given what I saw and heard, they were very proud to be American citizens. They retained their citizenship zealously. They wanted to be sure they were invited to the July Fourth reception. They would come once in a while to my office just to chat. I don't recall ever having a single problem with these people. They always got their checks on time. But, that was back then. I don't know what it is like now.

Q: I was in Yugoslavia, some years later, and a social security team came in. We had to spend quite a bit of time looking at it. They were checking on federal benefits, fraud, in both Yugoslavia and Greece. Oddly enough, Greece was much more of a problem.

LAKAS: I would expect so.

Q: Yugoslavia had some, but it was usually very close to the Greek border, where they were having problems.

LAKAS: What you described was very apparent in the 1960s and 1970s. Some people went down to Greece to enjoy a holiday. They went down with the purpose of helping to build a church, or bring in water to the village, or marry. They apparently simply were what they were. They had been very hardworking Greek Americans in the United States, who put in 14 hours a day in restaurants, which they owned. So, they go down to Greece, and they find the old lifestyle, which was taking it easy.

Q: Particularly guys, would sit around the cafï¿½, and drink Greek coffee while the women...

LAKAS: So, when the Greek Americans would say a few things about this, they would resent him. "Who and the hell are you? Just because you went to America and made some money." They didn't ask how hard he works, or what he did to do this. No. There was resentment. I am told today that there is some rudeness in Athens, for example, but I also get from Greeks themselves, that this is normal in a place like Athens.

Q: But, anyway, in Ireland, you didn't. At this point, there was practically no such thing as American tourism, was there?

LAKAS: Not really. When an American came in, we would be delighted to receive him. There was so few in number that we were happy to see them come to the office. If they called on a Sunday to get a special assistance, we were glad to help them. We were able to move out of the consulate, and not live with my wife and child up on the top floor, so we would get some privacy. We found a rental that we kept for about two years. So, I can just picture the old time consul sitting there for years and years, after living on the top floor; calls would come in Sunday night or Monday morning, or Saturday afternoon, or whatever, the door bell would always be ringing.

Q: What about if you had to locate somebody? I would assume you would find the church was probably the network that knew where everybody was, and what they were doing, and all.

LAKAS: And the "guarda," the police. Very, very effective. They could go right down to the roots of a village from Cork, and trace, effectively. They would do it willingly and happily. Then, say to me, "Well now, your honor, it is time for a wee bit of whiskey."

Q: Did you find drinking a problem?

LAKAS: I didn't see it on the streets. St. Patrick's Day, as I saw it in Cork at that time, was a religious holiday. Everything shut down tight, including bugs. Following the military parade, the archbishop would have a five-hour lunch for the dignitaries, and there would be copious quantities of sherry, and long speeches, from everyone. That's what I saw. They drank, yes they did. They still do today. I was in a restaurant in Galway last week, in the evening having dinner. I was surprised to see a table of six girls next to me; some were married, some were not, and the bottles were stacked up on the table. But, if I lived in Ireland, maybe I would like to have a few drinks myself.

Q: Well, you left there in 1951. You were still a staff officer. You certainly had responsibilities that would equal... In other words, there really wasn't any difference.

LAKAS: No, except my passport read "special" which amounted to being treated very well by the authorities. I was under the Civil Service. Some of the benefits of the FSOs were not mine. There was a degree of elitism, a degree of special feeling about being an FSO, as compared to being a staff officer. I should add that one was never sure whether you would continue in the career as a staff officer, or whether this was a temporary assignment, and then you would be told, "This is finished, go on and find another job."

Q: Well then, in 1951, where did you go?

LAKAS: I was appointed officially principal officer of a consulate at Cork. In 1953, my mother died, and I called the embassy to send down, which they did, an assigned officer. I caught the plane out of Shannon. I knew I wasn't coming back. I left my wife and child in Cork to pack up and follow me. I arrived in Washington, and did what I needed to do. I had a temporary assignment in the Department of State. I arrived in May, and by November, I was on my way to Alexandria, Egypt, as the deputy principal officer, out of a consulate general. It was one of the biggest we had there at that time.

Q: Great pickings.

LAKAS: It was the first time I saw a CIA station chief. It was my first encounter. That's how large it was.

Q: You were in Alexandria from 1953 to ?

LAKAS: 1957.

Q: What was the situation in Egypt in 1953?

LAKAS: Farouk was about to leave by invitation.

Q: He left from Alexandria, didn't he?

LAKAS: That's right. A person named Muhammad Naguib appeared on the scene.

Q: General Naguib, yes.

LAKAS: There was a lot of uncertainty. I was more attentive to getting that consular back into shape again, as the administrator number two. Records had to be returned to St. Louis. My job was also to handle the visas in addition to helping the consul general run the office. I was promoted to class eight. Very shortly after Naguib appeared, about a year later, someone named Nasser took over openly. I would hear from various directions that we were working hand-in-hand with Nasser. Byroade was the ambassador. Two generals who understood each other...

Q: Henry Byroade, yes. He was the youngest general in the American army at one point, during World War II.

LAKAS: There was a discussion on helping them to build the Aswan Dam, which in itself would retrieve a whole lot of land that could be used for cotton. Then, whatever happened behind closed doors, I have no idea. All I heard was that we had pulled away from the promises we had made to Nasser to deliver the goods. Nasser lost face, and he was very unhappy with us. Very shortly thereafter, he went to Moscow, and about two weeks later, we saw ships bringing in tanks, guns, and that kind of stuff. July 26th, Independence Day, I went to hear Nasser deliver a speech in the square in Alexandria. I stood on the balcony looking down on him. There was a vast multitude of people. At about 10:35, they began to announce that the Suez Canal had been nationalized. The military forces, the police, out of Egypt, had ceased. The people down in the square didn't quite understand what he said, so he repeated what he said. My translator next to me told me what he said. When they understood what he said, the place was in bedlam. I got in one of the first reports to Washington that night. Our consul general was not there, he was on home leave, so that was it. Then, began the maneuvering from Cyprus and elsewhere, France, Britain, and the Navy moving around and around, making threatening gestures. We in America began to put together something called The Canal Users Association, with Lloyd Henderson heading it. He would frequently dial us at the embassy in Cairo. What happened was an open attack on Egypt.

A telephone call came in to me. I think it was a Sunday night, saying to prepare the consulate for extensive requirements, break out the radio, and bring in the personnel, which we did. I didn't see my family again for six months. They were evacuated. We evacuated 6,000 citizens, mostly American citizens, but others who were subjects of countries friendly to the United States. We did it through Alexandria. We had already rehearsed earlier the evacuation plan. We had the American business people take on the job as wardens, check addresses, check passports, so we were ready. The sixth fleet came in, and stayed outside the harbor to make sure they were there beneath them. A week later, there appeared in the office some 36 Americans who had not heard of the war, because the Israelis had taken them up through Sinai, to attack from that area. The consul general returned hastily from Washington. I was given the job of taking 36 citizens across the desert to Libya.

Q: You've written an article for the Foreign Service, but I'd like you to describe it.

LAKAS: Well, there was no way to get out of Egypt, either by ship or plane, or railway, either to the Sudan, south from Alexandria or Cairo, or east or west. The canal had been closed. The ships had been sunk. Transit was virtually impossible. So, it was agreed by the embassy and the State Department that we would approach an oil company, The Sahara Petroleum Company, that was exploring oil in the Katar depression, and ask them to help us with our vehicles. We put together 16 vehicles, carry-alls, whatever. They gave us supplies, oil, food. We summoned the people who were going to do this to meet us at the Cecil Hotel in Alexandria, with me serving as the commanding officer, so to speak, of the other convoy. It took us approximately 22 hours to reach Tabu. There were some problems along the way, which I cannot discuss. We had hoped that the consul in Benghazi would have been informed of our approach; that the authorities of Libya would be there on the spot to get us through the required examinations, but he had an accident on route to do all of this. We got to the Frontera and the Libyans wouldn't let us in. I finally persuaded the commanding officer to call the foreign ministry, to speak with the foreign minister himself, who got in touch with our embassy, in Tripoli, who said, "Oh, yes, we have people coming in, please let them through. They are clear." We didn't have our baggage examined. We didn't have our baggage examined in Egypt either, because of negotiations that went on between me and the...

Arrangements had been made by the embassy in Libya to have TWA fly in from Rome to the British airbase of Tobruk, which they did. We got on board, and for reasons unknown to me at that time, I was not permitted by the Egyptian authorities to return to Egypt. So, I escorted the group to Rome, and went on to Athens, where I spoke with the ambassador at the embassy. When those arrangements were made, I was put on a kappa boat and returned to Alexandria. That was it.

Q: Let's go before the Suez Canal was nationalized. Who was your consul general?

LAKAS: Donald Edgar.

Q: Was he an Arabic hand, or not?

LAKAS: No. I was not either. We relied entirely on local employees.

Q: You were there during the oust of King Farouk, weren't you? What was it like then? That was done fairly benevolently, wasn't it?

LAKAS: Yes it was.

Q: You put on the out, and the officers of the garrison saluted, and he steamed out?

LAKAS: That's right. He went onto a reasonably comfortable life in Nice, Cannes. I think the country was ready for a change. I had just gotten there. It was Thanksgiving, 1953. I didn't sense any trouble, because I was new to the area. Things seemed very peaceful. Life in Alexandria impressed me a great deal. Social life was very much what it used to be in the 1930s, a large community of Europeans, a really large community of Greeks, Armenians, people of Jewish faith. So, we went about our business in a very normal way. I don't know what the embassy was doing down in Cairo, but I know up there in Alexandria, we dealt with business as usual. We issued non-immigrant visas and immigrant visas. Shipping was a big thing for us, but our friends across the corridor handled that.

Q: You're talking about the CIA, yes. Did you find the hand of Egyptian authorities relatively heavy; the police, and all that, at that time?

LAKAS: It took some time for us to realize that we were under observation, that our movements were pretty well followed. But, I didn't sense any anxiety among the Europeans until much later, when we began to see clusters, of the properties of the local communities. In 1954, I think, we began to see the change; the watershed change. We then knew that things were not going too well, between us.

Q: Were you seeing a growing sense of anti-western nationalism?

LAKAS: Yes. It was beginning to appear. Generally, when the economy of a country such as Egypt is not faring too well, those who are in the top levels reach out to divert the attention out of the population; to the Palestinian cause, to the western imperialism, to the effects of colonialism in that country. You don't watch what is going on in your pocketbook, you become emotionally involved in something else. So, we saw that happening.

Q: We had a post-aporsyeed?

LAKAS: Yes.

Q: Did you have much connection with that?

LAKAS: I didn't see the man, Cuomo, who was the consul, very often.

Q: When the Egyptians seized the Suez Canal, did things change?

LAKAS: Most everybody thought it would change. They thought that the handling of the shipping would be inept, that the handling of the transit would be inept, that the people taking over had no experience in managing a big corporation, such as the Suez Canal Company. But, seemingly, they did rather well. We had the Panama Canal on our side as well to deal with.

Q: I remember at the time, particularly, the British were putting out the idea that they have to do this because these Wogs won't be able to handle it.

LAKAS: Lloyd Henderson was thinking of creating an international corporation consortium that would collect the fees, and turn some over to the Egyptians, and whatever else, but it didn't work out.

Q: What about in Alexandria itself? With this action, this is when Nasser really changed the dynamics of the Middle East.

LAKAS: He was very unhappy with us. He was lead to believe that we would give him a lot of financial aid and technical assistance as well, to build the Aswan Dam, and a few other things. For whatever reason, this never materialized. I suspect that the lobbies here in Washington prevailed. I don't know which lobbies. He believed in the cry that came up from the Arabs. He posed as champion of Arabs, and he saw himself rising to the crest of being the main political Arab in the Middle East. Iraq was a kind of a sore point with him, but basically he wanted to see Egypt take off. We wanted to have something called the Iraqi...

Q: CENTO [Central Treaty Organization].

LAKAS: Thank you. CENTO.

Q: When we put together this equivalent to NATO, which went from Pakistan, Turkey, Iraq...

LAKAS: I stayed four years continuously. No home leave. The family would ultimately return to Alexandria in 1957, perhaps April or May. We took up residence again. Everything was normal on the surface, not so normal underneath. Then, word came in that I was being transferred and given my request to attend a university to further my education. So, they assigned me to Wisconsin University.

Q: Before we get to that, after 1956, was the police presence more apparent, and did you feel anti-Americanism, at least, officially?

LAKAS: Yes. It was humorous, in the sense that the disguised detectives downstairs of the consulate or in front of my house wore soiled Galiberes (gowns), but they had the most polished black shoes you ever saw. But, they were very kind to the children. Officially, we could still see the governor. Out of the area, we could call on the other ministers, but there was a cooling, it wasn't as warm as it used to be. They would accept to attend our receptions. I don't know what went on in other areas of our system, but I, as an FSS, about to be an FSO, dealt with other matters. When we went down to the governor to ask him to guarantee security for our people making their way to the port for the evacuation, it was almost given immediately. He told me privately he didn't want to see us leave. He liked America and he liked Americans. One could not help but feel that perhaps he saw us as an umbrella of protection, from the bomb coming down. There were two kinds of relationships. One was a very normal, long-time, friendly, Egyptian style friendship, that had gone on for a long, long time. Then, suddenly, the superimposed, "Let's not be too nice to them." The word came from Cairo.

Q: What about during the Suez war, during the time you were there, helping to evacuate, were there over flights bombing or anything else, in Alexandria?

LAKAS: Yes. The British took care of that. They knew what they wanted to bomb. They had built most of these places, so they went to the barracks, they went to the garrisons, they went to the airports, they went to the port facilities, power plants. There were near misses of the consulate itself.

Q: What was the feeling from the people you were dealing with, the Americans, but also yourself about this, because as it became very apparent, the United States told the British and the French to cut out the nonsense, or we were going to cut off their water. The British found that they couldn't afford it. It created, probably the greatest breach we've ever had, between the United States and Great Britain.

LAKAS: Particularly in the light of a stress-rebel gannon, to send "volunteers" to Egypt. Also, by the fact that we had encouraged the Hungarians to rise up.

Q: This is during the Hungarian revolt.

LAKAS: Then, we pulled away. This was not good. We looked bad. The local community, the Americans who remained there, before going out with me, were very ashamed of what was going on.

Q: Did you get any feel about the Israelis, in Alexandria?

LAKAS: Not a single word. We didn't know where they were. We had one person of Jewish faith on the staff of the consulate, but speaking for myself, I did not know others existed. It was not my concern.

Q: Israel wasn't a big factor.

LAKAS: It was coming up from the other side. It was collusion, from what I was told. Therefore, they got so close to Cairo, that reportedly Nasser had arranged for a plane to take him out of Egypt.

Q: You left there when?

LAKAS: June 1957.

Q: You went to University of Wisconsin. Had the Wriston program by this time...

LAKAS: That's right. Right in the middle of the evacuation, the word came in that I had been transferred to the career corps, and appointed grade four.

Q: Which is about lieutenant colonel level, I think, isn't it?

LAKAS: Yes. It went down to five within a month. Then, I was promoted to four, again.

Q: They changed ranks just about that time. You went to the University of Wisconsin. You were there, I guess, for a year. What were you taking?

LAKAS: I had two assignments; (1) to operate a visa correspondence course, to teach visas to the staff abroad. We had drawn up a correspondence course. We would grade those courses. The other was to take advanced political science. We could finish it for a masters five. Nobody bothered. But, you were expected to get all As. You were also expected to accept speaking assignments. McCarthyism was still very strong in Wisconsin. I had difficulty in convincing people that I was not a homosexual, or that I paid taxes, or I didn't wear pin stripe trousers. I would get calls from State saying, "Go and address Carlisle College. Go down to Deloitte and address them."

Q: How did you find your reception at the various colleges and universities?

LAKAS: Academically, very strong. They wanted to know who we really are. What do we do. What does a consul do? What does an ambassador do? It was at that stage in our history where hardly anybody knew what we did. So, on that part, it was overwhelming. But, there was a suspicion that remained a residue with McCarthyism, and what happened with him and others, that we really weren't serving the best interest of our country. Whatever I could do, based on my personality, in persuading the kids and the faculty was really difficult. The faculty did not want to see me. But, they would be very civil. I would get a few whacks in when I possibly could. The kids were very responsive. They weren't as mindful about what McCarthy said. They wanted to know what kind of life did they live. They wanted to know my background, and did I go to Yale, Harvard, or Princeton. How did I get into the Foreign Service? What was my job? How did I handle this episode, in Egypt, for example? Did I intend to stay in the Foreign Service? Did I have my family with me? What are the promotional opportunities? Were women recognized as being qualified for advancement in the Foreign Service? That's what I got from them. But, the faculty was very much politically oriented. It was a kind of disdain, picking up something...

Q: This is interesting.

LAKAS: It bothered the hell out of me.

Q: The University of Wisconsin, itself, is considered one of the centers of liberalism of all universities in the American system.

LAKAS: Back then, McCarthy had a tremendous influence in that area. A big influence. I'm sure that has changed. But, then I found it in New York City. I was sent to New York to talk to Brooklyn College, talk to a city college. It was a bad time.

Q: After finishing this, this brings us up to about 1958, would it be?

LAKAS: Right.

Q: What happened then?

LAKAS: I was transferred to Washington from Wisconsin. I drove to Washington. My family went to Connecticut. I was asked to serve two years as my dues paying requirement in personnel. In personnel, I was assigned to perform this evaluation branch. In performing this evaluation branch, I had to deal with preparing the selection boards for the FSO promotions. I did that for two years. Then, I was asked to indicate what my desire was.

Q: Let's talk about this - 1958 to 1963. What was your impression of what were you getting from the efficiency reports and all, which lead to the promotion panels?. Were you getting indications that these weren't very good, or that they were unfair? What were you getting?

LAKAS: I was very fortunate. I was among the first to appear at Wisconsin University, jacket, tie, dignity, concentration. I was there to do a job, to learn to manage the visa program. I behaved as I would in an embassy, in class and outside of class. So, they were quite taken with it. So, the reports they were sending back to Washington just simply gave me a tremendous boost. What I did for them, the quality I brought into the classroom, the willingness on my part to share my time with anyone who wanted to talk about the Foreign Service. They were aware of this new program called The Visa Correspondence Course, that I was dealing with. They knew it was only temporary, for one year. So, I came out of that looking very, very good.

Q: But, when you would get in a performance evaluation in Washington, what was your impression of the promotion system and how it worked at that time?

LAKAS: It depended, I believe, on how your supervisor prepared the report. It depended on people you knew in Washington. In my case, four years in Egypt, plus Cork and Glasgow, and the performance in Egypt, in particular, under the full gaze of Lloyd Henderson, Pete Hart, Ambassador Hare, and the successful evacuation of U.S. citizens without losing one single life, and the command of a convoy from Alexandria to Tobruk, had set me up pretty well.

Q: But, looking at it as somebody who is sitting inside the system now, and the promotion system, were you getting any reflections from promotion panel people or from others, how the system worked? I'm not talking about you. I'm talking about the system. We're talking about the 1958 to 1960 period.

LAKAS: Sitting in the outside room of the five selection board room of the center, providing logistical support and files, I could him them discoursing. I could hear them say that this report was full of crap. I could hear them say that this was a biased report. They could see this. These were experienced people, particularly those who came from the private sector, non-career. So, they were very diligent about rating the FSOs in the top 10%, the middle of 10%, and the lower 10%. The biggest agonies came when they found people just either on the bottom of the 10% on top, or just in the top of the middle 10% but just couldn't make it into the top 10%, because there were others that were a little bit better. They would agonize over this. The efficiency report system itself they felt depended largely on the personality of the person writing the report. It also depended a lot on biases, prejudices. It made the work of the selection board very, very difficult to try to penetrate the garbage that they came across. When they saw a report that was superb, they would write a letter of commendation, signed by the selection board members, to be sent out to the reporting officer. It was at that time when the reporting officer also reported on the children, on their wives.

Q: They had the secret section, or the confidential section, the report which the rated officer wouldn't see until he or she came back to Washington.

LAKAS: That's right. Those who served on the boards, and particularly me, support staff, that supported them. Fred Darnell, who was the king, began to see what impressed the selection board, how a report was written. One thing would be in the report that would really catch somebody's eye. You could make one up. You could play the role. This is what would catch their eye. He does this, he does that. So, you learn to go into character. I'm sure some of us who went out from Fred Darnell's shop remember very clearly the points that were looked for by the selection board. They made sure they behaved according to them. So, that these would be in the reports that the selection board would see. Then, there were those who were well known, particularly, at the top level, career ministers, career ambassadors. It was a very closes circuit. It was an eye opener for me, very much so.

Q: Did you have the feeling that it was "an old boy's club," or was it a pretty fair system, did you think?

LAKAS: Up above, I think it was an "old boys club." As you went down toward the lower end...

Q: This is in the rank levels.

LAKAS: As you went down to the lower end, you were judged primarily on what was written. If you could write well, you either made a man's career, or you didn't make a man's career. It depended on how you wrote it. They didn't know who you were. They just saw a paper. They read the paper, and they based their ratings on that. Each one around the table, five or six of them, had a range of zero to ten. At the end of the day, they added up the total for small Joe and who else. You got a five, he got an eight, and he got a nine. But, they would close the door and they would argue. Particularly, the arguments would come from those who were not Foreign Service. You are helpless to a degree. It wasn't until later when they put in all the safeguards, and it became a little more even-handed.

Q: Well, then in 1960, where did you go?

LAKAS: They asked me what I wanted to do. I said that I wanted to be an Arabist. I told them I wanted to study the Arab language, and I wanted to do area studies as well. At that time, I was 40, I guess, early forties. They agreed. So, they sent me to the Foreign Service Institute for one year, here in Virginia. The second year I was in Beirut.

Q: Did anybody express concern that it's pretty hard to learn a difficult language like Arabic, the older you get?

LAKAS: It's interesting that you mention that. I was warned that I was a little too old for the Arab language, that it wouldn't be too easy for me to understand it, and they asked whether I really wanted to do this. They also asked whether I preferred going somewhere else, given the record I had already amassed. Why would I want to jeopardize it, by failing Arabic, which I came very close to doing? I said, "No, I want to be a real professional." At that time, the memories of TE Lawrence still were quite strong. He learned to speak reasonably well, nowhere near what the missionary kids could speak. They were superb; the Hugh Arans, and all the others. If we got out with a 3.3, that was really an accomplishment. So, on we went. I didn't ask my wife, I didn't ask my children. I was going to become a professional Arabist.

Q: You went to the FSI one year here in Washington, and then where did you go?

LAKAS: They had a system whereby the AUB, American University of Beirut, worked with the embassy. The embassy had a top floor, had classrooms. They had engaged Palestinians, who speak about the best Arabic you can hear. It is very southern, and very sibilant, and easy to understand. So, we would go back and forth, for one year. Then, they polished it off by sending us to any place I wanted for two weeks or a month, on the scene practice in the language itself, meaning you could go to a refugee camp, as I did, outside Jerusalem. The UN would help with that, or you could take separate duty in Syria, Damascus, or temporary duty elsewhere. Once it was over, then you got your assignment. After Jerusalem, my assignment was Kuwait.

Q: When you were at the refugee camp... This was obviously Palestinian refugees.

LAKAS: Navos Tecum Jericho. I did not live on the premises. They thought it was too risky. But, arrangements had been made for me to have dinner with the seniors of that particular refugee camp, speaking Arabic as much as possible, to hear what they had to say about the American attitude toward the Palestinian issue. I peeked into the classrooms to see what was on the blackboard, to see what the kids were being taught. I hate to tell you what they were being taught.

Q: What were they being taught?

LAKAS: To kill. To destroy Israel, and wipe her off the map. There were pictures of bare-chested Palestinians charging up the hill with dagger in hand, that kind of thing. Even then, the Palestinians had reasonable hope that we Americans would come to our senses and realize we made a terrible mistake in recognizing Israel. That we would take steps to ameliorate this. What the steps were, we had no idea. They would quote Wilson's 14 points often to me. They had hopes also that the oil companies who had exercised legendary power that supposedly they had back here in Washington to move the State Department and others in the right direction. They did not speak to me about the offers of proposal made by the UN to create two states. They just didn't want Israel on. They assumed that I would be reporting this back to Washington. Every other night, whether it would be a meeting in a huge room, it was somewhere with all the men sitting around the wall, just talking. Some of it I could not understand. I was not that literate in Arabic, but there would be somebody who could handle English very well. That's what I did.

Q: While you were taking Arabic, you were sort of the new boy on the block. Well, you had been in Egypt and all that. But, were you seeing a core of American Arabists who were anti-Israel? This is one of the charges that has been levied against the Foreign Service.

LAKAS: I personally did not hear this. What I did get from those who had been children of missionaries, for example, was an expression of regret from their parents that we saw fit to jeopardize what had been done so well all those years, going back to 1815, 1820. On the effort by the United States' policy to create, instead of a material legacy, a la British, but create charity of a first-rate educational system, the three colleges, one in Cairo, one in Beirut, one in Istanbul. It was also their policy to create numerous hospitals and clinics to attend to the ill, educational arrangements by grants for the kids to come to America and spend a year. That we would go ahead and jeopardize all this simply to recognize Israel. Does that give you the answer?

Q: Yes. So, where did you want to go, or what did you want to do?

LAKAS: I went to Kuwait, but I didn't choose it, I was sent.

Q: You were in Kuwait from?

LAKAS: 1961 to 1964.

Q: What was Kuwait like at that time?

LAKAS: That's a good question. At the moment we were going to enter Kuwait, Iraq had threatened to invade Kuwait. They began by cutting off oil supplies. Kuwait depended entirely on Iraqi water. It was portable water at that time. So, Kuwait, along with that, had declared its independence from the British, but the British were still very evident. When we got there, the embassy was a small consulate general with the usual fans on the ceiling, no air conditioning. They had a couple of apartment buildings for the staff. It was a very small staff. This was on the beach. The focus at that time for me was to report on the oil production, and what was going on in the field of oil industry in Kuwait. That later expanded to an annual report or more of the economic development of Kuwait, socially as well. Once we were recognized as an embassy, we had a chargï¿½ d'affaires.

Q: Who was that?

LAKAS: Dayton Mak.

Q: Dayton Mak. I know Dayton very well.

LAKAS: The ambassador for both regions, for both countries, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, was Pete Hart. But, we remained under a chargï¿½ for sometime, until Rex Cottam came down. They built a smaller embassy building. We moved over into it. They left the consulate standing on the same property. Of course, the Kuwait government was willing to give us any kind of property for us to build on. The Russians were above us, and the British were below us. Some of the nice things were we had access to the beach. We were swimming during the afternoon. There was a reasonable degree of social life between Kuwaitis and ourselves. Here, the Kuwaiti women were available to our American women, unlike Libya, where they were put in a back room.

Q: Or Saudi Arabia.

LAKAS: The heat was enormous. We got along very well with Dayton. He did a great job. When he left they appointed Cottam as the ambassador; the first one. I was designated as the economics affairs officer. I wrote a report without knowing he was going to be the ambassador. It was a very comprehensive report on not only the economic development for the past year or two, but the impact on its society of Kuwait. I also pointed out that more and more every year outsiders were being brought in from the Arab countries, or from India, or from Pakistan, to handle the work of the government. A large number of Palestinians were in place. So, by 1964, it was time for me to go. From there, I was sent to the Department of Commerce as a guest officer to train with Commerce, who was beginning to awake to the realities of the need for them to have their own Foreign Service. They thought maybe somebody like me would be an ideal person.

Q: I would like to go back to Kuwait for a little while. When you arrived there, how did the Iraqi threat to Kuwait play out?

LAKAS: The British paraded some forces in the Persian Gulf. They were still very strong.

Q: They brought an aircraft carrier into it.

LAKAS: It was deemed by the Iraqi government that it would not be of any use for them to make any more noises. The threat was always muted, but it was there, until the Kuwaitis were able to build their own desalinization plants, and not rely on Iraq for drinking water.

Q: I was an economics officer in Dhahran from 1958 to 1960. Well, I did consul work the first year and economic work the second year. The contrast between how Aramco was dealing with its Arab work force... They were Arabizing Aramco. As long as the oil kept going, they were training and all, but yet you could see the contrast between that and the Iranian Petroleum Company, and in Qatar, the Qatar Petroleum Company, where the British looked with disdain on Americans as giving away the show, and they wanted to keep control on it. What was happening in Kuwait at that time?

LAKAS: The Kuwait oil company was just beginning to look at what Aramco was doing. The American part of the Kuwait oil company was attempting to persuade their partners to go along with what Aramco was doing, because they saw this as inevitable, especially if they were educated here in America. They would come back to their jobs, having an empathy for American way of doing things, and the American presence. By that time, there was thinking going on in Washington that the British were failing, and perhaps it would be best for us to replace them.

Q: Well, we established residence in Bahrain. This was a couple of aircraft carrier tenders. They were seaplane tenders. But, still, we had a token for us there. Was it your impression that you were getting to the British way of running things, which is essentially to keep tight control, and this wasn't going to work?

LAKAS: Right. The executives of Kuwait oil company, Edmond Oil, and Getty, would come to our office and talk with us. They felt that was the way to go. The Japanese were just beginning to come in at that moment with offshore drilling. But, that was the feeling among Americans. Educate our staff and give them a chance to move on, however, retain control where control should be retained. The deal with OPEC hadn't made an appearance.

Q: But, as Americans, we didn't see the end of civilization if the Kuwaitis took over the oil companies. Our feeling in Saudi Arabia was that this was a natural development with the British. I mean, did you run across...[This is tape three, side one, with Nick Lakas.]

LAKAS: Yes, they felt that. Typical America, we were rushing up the wrong street. Also, they had in their mind suspicion that this was one of several ways we were going about replacing them at the center of power.

Q: So, I imagine there was a certain amount of resentment, which would come out.

LAKAS: It wasn't open for renewal there.

Q: How did you find talking to the Al Kharafi family? Who was the ruling family in Kuwait?

LAKAS: I can't remember.

Q: How did you find relations with the movers of Kuwait and the family there?

LAKAS: Very good. On the surface, very hospitable. We had easy entry into the ministries, to raise complaints or to exercise some business requirements. I have to add though they were very careful about making sure that they played a very balanced game among all powers, specifically the British and the Americans. At that time, they didn't know exactly where this thing was going to lead. They didn't want to be on the losing end of it. We had great rapport. They attended our receptions. They had access to our beach. They would bring the families down to the beach we had. We didn't see the sheik very often. The ambassador probably did, not often, but he probably saw him. Then, we began to see a little more change when they decided to recognize and permit the Soviet Union to open up an embassy. It was then that Khan became very nervous about the presence of the Russians. I asked for a marine squad to be sent to the embassy. The State Department couldn't understand why we needed a marine contingent in such a small area. To show them that we needed it, we put the entire male staff on overnight duty. Each one had to serve time guarding the embassy safe.

We had an alarm system that was so sensitive that if a mouse let off air, we would hear it in our bedrooms. We would rush down to see who had penetrated the embassy safe. It meant that we were sleepless. It meant that we were irritable. It meant we weren't very happy with him. He felt that by doing this, he would force the State Department to do what he wanted them to do. They didn't.

Q: It's interesting because we had a full marine guard detachment of about six marines in Dhahran. We had an airbase there. It really wasn't that necessary.

LAKAS: Well, we felt secretly that he wanted all the trappings that went with an embassy.

Q: Well, a marine guard does have a certain amount of panache.

LAKAS: So, they finally gave up on that. We had a man called... I forget his name. He came in as DCM. He tried to enforce the ambassador's will, but we were so goddam tired by that time, we didn't care. We refused invitations to come back for a second term. They were not happy about that either. Anyway, I left.

Q: Okay, so we'll pick this up. You left when?

LAKAS: 1964.

Q: So, I can put it at the end, where did you go?

LAKAS: I was asked to serve temporarily at the Department of Commerce, to undergo their training program to become a commercial officer, so they thought, and then be assigned to Libya.

Q: Alright. We'll pick it up then when you're going to the Department of Commerce. Great.

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Today is March 18, 2002. Nick, when you went to Commerce, what were you getting from your colleagues in the State Department about Commerce and its reputation, and working with Commerce? This is before you went over.

LAKAS: The personnel people indicated that this would be an opportunity to become more diverse in my professional background, and I should enjoy it. That's all I heard. There was utter silence from other areas. But, when I got to Commerce Department, I was astonished at how civil they were, how happy they were to see me as a guest officer. What year are we talking about?

Q: 1965.

LAKAS: Yes, exactly. Immediately, I was assigned as deputy director of the Office of Investment to be serving with Stanley Katz, who was the director of the office and very highly regarded by the Commerce administration. He ended up as director of the counterpart of the World Bank in the Philippines. I was astonished at this, because they didn't know me. Somehow or other, they must have simply picked my name out of a hat. Almost immediately, they inserted me right into a job which they created for this purpose, to accommodate me as deputy director. My job was to run the organization, leaving Stan Katz free to do policy, and to travel, and managing the division. This was about 30, 40 people. It was a great challenge for me.

Q: In the first place, at that time, in the mid-1960s, was it called the Department of Investment? What was the office called?

LAKAS: It was the Office of International Investments.

Q: What did that mean at that time?

LAKAS: It was divided into two divisions, two sections. One section was to deal with fostering foreign investment into the United States, and the other direct foreign investment abroad.

Q: Was this an office with people abroad, or was this strictly within Washington?

LAKAS: I would say 99% of it was in Washington. They would travel from time to time. Stan Katz was the one who really was a persona for the organization. He attended the bank meetings from time to time. He wanted to be free of having to administer an office, but he was head of it. So, they saw it as an excellent opportunity to do just that. My challenge was to engage the staff of that office, and to build up a confidence in me, being the new kid on the block. Not one of them, but someone called a Foreign Service officer.

Q: I would have thought that you would have been breaking some rice bowls because you weren't total service. Here was a supervisory job, and these were people who normally would aspire to the job. Here, you're plunked in from outside.

LAKAS: Yes. There was considerable consternation for the first two months, among the division chiefs and the section chief. I moved with great caution. I was fortunate to be given problems they themselves didn't want to deal with. These were administrative problems and dealing with the State Department. I did it quite well.

Q: Let's talk about some of the problems.

LAKAS: Yes. Overseas investments. They had not had any experience in dealing with people overseas. These were host countries where they wanted more American investment to go into. There was an example of having to deal with a problem in Korea; how to persuade the Korean government to provide a one-stop service for Americans to consider investing in Korea. This was joint ventures, capital interest, whatever. I handled that directly with the embassy here, and with the Korean desk at the State Department. To my happiness, within a month or two, we saw a new office created in the Republic of Korea, in Ministry of Finance, labeled "one-stop service." Their eyes kind of bugged at this one, at the Commerce Department, that we could do it. That gave them a little different perspective of who I am, and what I was supposed to do. I was not there to take their job. I was going to leave eventually. It was a two year duty as a guest officer. I was going somewhere else. I was not there to supplant them, I was there to help them.

Also, another problem occurred when the American Chamber of Commerce complained to the Secretary of Commerce that they weren't getting the kind of response they needed from this particular office. When their membership would inquire what it would take to do business in a particular country. They didn't have, of course, a personal representative, a Commerce representative abroad, particularly at an important post. I already had a couple posts under my belt. I sat down to reorganize the entire office. I drew it out on paper. We considered moving them physically from where they were to more spacious offices in the Commerce Department, in ensuring that this division would be completely identified for what it is, and on and on. I did this by consulting with them, the division chiefs. I made sure no noses were out of joint. I gave myself the worst office spot I could find. It didn't have windows on the street.

Q: That was a smart move.

LAKAS: I would play golf with them once in a while, at Kenwood. I would have lunches with them. I would commiserate with them about the ills of bureaucracy, especially those that occurred between me and State. So, there was kind of a build up of, "Hey, this guy isn't bad. He's a diplomat. We never saw one before. He's here to be helpful. He's demonstrated that he is helpful, because once we finish the physical move..." Everything had been planned just right. I went around saying, "You're going to go to this space. Is that okay with you? I'll be over here if you need me." I wanted them to know I was simply a Stan Katz alter ego, and someday they may be a guest officer at State. They began to think of having an exchange program. It was a remarkable experience.

Q: How did you find State? Did you find you were having to break down barriers there about Commerce?

LAKAS: Barriers that were very difficult to break down and barriers that were not completely broken down until 1972, when Commerce somehow or another got enormous clout, and the new secretary of Commerce could take over the entire commercial program from the State Department, at a loss of appropriations.

Q: How did you find dealing with State? I've often thought that real diplomacy isn't dealing with other governments, it's really dealing with this. With other governments, everybody really knows what the name of the game is. But, it's dealing with the government, between departments, sometimes, between bureaus.

LAKAS: That's an excellent question. In the beginning, I had a feeling that they couldn't care less. They had dumped me over in the Commerce Department. So, the attitude was "take care of yourself." It was kind of a loss of two years of my career track, of being an Arabist. They expected me to fall flat on my face. Therefore, they would say, "That's the kind of person we sent. That's what he deserves." But, with each success, and glowing efficiency reports coming out of the Commerce Department, they began to take credit. "Oh, we sent the best person we could find. I'm glad he is doing the job for you. Good old Nick." They began taking credit for it. That's the way the State Department operates, you see. We have top-notch people.

Q: What about when you were dealing with the Korean desk? Was it responsive to the problem you presented to them?

LAKAS: Yes, because they had the kind of personnel on station, at the Korea desk, that was very much interested in seeing that they worked together with AID, in helping Korea to take off economically as it did.

Q: It was just at the beginning - Park Chung Hee had just taken over a couple years before. Things for the first time... It had been considered a basket case.

LAKAS: The same thing. Initially, it was, "Well, it's a job for you, sure. Take the Korea desk." But, when the Koreans themselves showed enormous energy and imagination and drive in moving the economy, and listening very carefully to the advice of all Americans that came in officially to be helpful to them. They changed their personalities. Oh, that was the place to be. It's successful. They wanted to make it more successful. "Nick, what can we do for you?"

Q: Did you find any countries where it really was difficult to break through because of their entrenched positions, bureaucracies, what have you?

LAKAS: Countries other than the United States?

Q: No, in dealing with investments, the countries we were having to deal with.

LAKAS: Japan. Big. Don't rock the boat. The military have a say here. It was very frustrating.

Q: On our part though, later we got very much involved in hammering away at Japan, which I think we are still doing. But, when we're talking about the mid-1960s, don't mess with Japan. Was this it?

LAKAS: Yes. Another thing that was an element was when our economy would go into a recession, or a kind of recession, there was again the pep rally talk about doing something more to improve American exports. They wanted to do something with countries like Japan. That would draw the attention of countries that were... They were having problems in Buffalo, Rochester, and elsewhere, medium size companies, because of economic recession, would become interested, to see what they could do abroad. When the economy would go up, nobody would pay any attention. They thought they could do far better back there in Buffalo, Rochester, and Albany, than they could in Libya, Tripoli, and elsewhere.

Q: I know when I was on the country team in Korea, in the mid to late 1970s, we had an awful time because the Koreans, for example, wanted to buy a fire engine, and they didn't want to buy a Japanese fire engine for political purposes, they wanted to buy an American fire engine. But, the American fire engine people were saying, "Well, we've got a good market here in the states. We don't want to bother with Korea." So, they bought Japanese fire engines.

LAKAS: The British, the French, the Italians, Japanese, are in there.

Q: Yes. This was sort of the undisclaimed back story of this. It was not a period of looking out.

LAKAS: The United States was hardly ever considered to be an export-oriented country. It was big enough here to take care of itself.

Q: What was your impression of the people in Commerce you were dealing with? The system, and the people?

LAKAS: I found them to be homespun civil service people. By that I mean they had finally accommodated themselves to a pace you would find at Commerce, at that time, from the top, down to mid-management. They simply were working, doing the best they could, but not quite inspired. They couldn't understand why I was inspired. They thought of me as another government employee, albeit a diplomat. "Thank you, nice to meet you. I never saw one before." When they started inviting me into their homes for dinner, that was a key to the breakthrough. The wives of the chiefs would ask my wife, "How is it living abroad? Do you enjoy it?" There was a rapport building up. It took about six to eight months to complete. In fact, I was so sorry to leave it, because it had become an old slipper of comfort. That's how they lived in the Commerce Department, an old slipper of comfort.

Q: This is the thing I've noticed when I've dealt with civil service. For the most part, we Foreign Service types build our own crisis. If there isn't one, we tend to make something of it. The idea of not going to work on a Saturday, somehow you feel that you are a slacker. To use all your leave, that really isn't done.

LAKAS: One day, I was summoned by Bill Patrick, who was the personnel director on the international side at the Commerce Department. It was toward the end of my second year. We too had been very happy with our home at Locust Street. The kids were doing well in school. It got to the point where I really did not want to go abroad again. I was feeling comfortable. He said to me, "Sit down, I have some news for you. We want to send you out to a new position in Korea as counselor of embassy, a country team member." I said, "I don't qualify for it. I don't have the grade. I'm a 5-3 officer. The way I understand it, counselors and ministers in the old system need to be two and above."

Q: An FSO-3 at that time was about the equivalent to being a colonel.

LAKAS: So, he opened the door, and started to fill out a piece of paper. He said, "You've just been promoted. You're on the promotion list." We made sure you got it. Does it give you an idea of what an impact my service at Commerce did? They appreciated me being there, and the work I did for them, a la Foreign Service style.

Q: Yes.

LAKAS: I said, "Korea, well, I'll speak to my wife about this. We might have to sell our house." He said, "Well, think about it. We need to send you out by July." That's how it all came about; class 2 officer, sent out to Korea, to meet Bill Porter, I was sent as counselor for commercial and economic affairs, and also to begin replacing the declining AID persona.

Q: You were in Korea from 1967 to when?

LAKAS: 1969 to 1972.

Q: I just might want to point out that this promotion from FSO-3 to FSO-2 put you in the equivalent to a general in the military rank.

LAKAS: Flag rank.

Q: Flag rank. In a way, your time in Commerce... If Commerce really liked you, there is often a Commerce representative on the promotion panel. They usually just sort of sit back. I'm sure when your name came up, this set off all sorts of bells and whistles. We're talking about bureaucratic politics. It was very important. They were sending a signal.

LAKAS: That they were going to create their own service if necessary. They wanted people they could rely on, and had confidence in people they knew.

Q: Before going out to Korea, what were you getting from the desk and all? Korea was going through an extremely important economic period. As I say, having been considered a "basket case" for so long, and all of a sudden... From the American point of view, and from the Korean point of view, it's one of the great success stories.

LAKAS: You're absolutely right in asking that question. Initially, there were those in that area of State who wanted to appoint one of the old lines Foreign Service officers.

Q: Economically.

LAKAS: Fewer economics. But, Thomas prevailed to such a degree that a two-page telegram was sent out to the embassy, mainly to Bill Porter, giving them a complete background history of my work in the Foreign Service since day one, and saying in essence, "You're lucky to get him. Don't mess with this. The Commerce Department has a deep interest in thinking that this man knew how to serve. This new position has been created just for him, and eventually, to take on a larger presence as AID declines in the embassy." It's not known to _____ that there has been an attempt on Clark's life, at the time when the North Koreans penetrated the blue house.

Q: This is when a squad came - North Koreans dressed like South Koreans.

LAKAS: They arrested these people, or did whatever they did with them. They found documents that indicated they were going after Bill Porter as well, the ambassador of the United States. Up to that moment, the embassy was accommodated in a very tiny building across from the Bandeau Center, consular and political sections in a very tiny building. AID was in this magnificent building, across the street from an industry of finance. It was then that _____ prevailed on the State Department and the others in Washington to permit the movement and transfer out, the entire embassy from that small building into the AID, and to pick up quarters that were usually reserved for the AID director.

Q: Actually, what you are describing is a bureaucratic battle. What was happening, particularly in many countries... It happened in Greece for a long time... where AID was running the show, in a way, because the minister of country X would come. I mean, these are the guys with money. Why talk to these ambassadors and diplomats? All they can do is get information, but they are not giving us money. So, the AID director was running his own show and they also had lots of perks for their employees. They were running a completely different system - higher promotions, better quarters, all that.

LAKAS: Commerce was aflame over their solution to promote interest to buy American products, whereas AID interest was, "Here's the money, Koreans, go and buy what you need at the best price possible," which meant at times, others felt it. So, you had a commercial attache virtually powerless in light of the strength of AID, being able to promote U.S. visits. AID would turn around and say, "Don't buy that. It's too expensive for you. Buy that from France, from Britain, from Finland." The job I had, again, was a challenge. "Go out there, replace AID, but do it gently. We don't want any problems back here in Washington. You may have problems getting on the country team as well, but do the best you can."

Q: Let's talk about the political and economic situation of Korea when you arrived there in 1969. We're talking about South Korea, obviously.

LAKAS: It was a military dictatorship. We were trying to prompt them into a more democratic process of government. But, we didn't want to rock the boat too much. The military had the upper hand, in terms of its presence in Korea. The military, American and Korean, were very, very close. On our side, we were trying to be equally as close with the youngsters who were beginning to become vice ministers in the Korean government, investment office, whatever. So, in this kind of underground fossil between the ambassador and the embassy, with AID, and also with the U.S. or UN military command.

Q: Well, it was technically a UN command.

LAKAS: So, he had his hands full. When Commerce prevailed and I was sent out to be his counselor, a new job at the embassy, he was delighted. He then began to say, "You are going to attend, Nick, the July Fourth reception at my house. Nick, you are going to be on the country team. I want to see you, Nick, travel the country far and wide, looking at the infrastructure, finding out where American products are being bought, find out which factories employ AID resources and report to me." The AID director was not very pleased with this.

Q: Who was the AID director?

LAKAS: Houston, I think, was one of them. _____ very strong political appointees.

Q: When you get a chance to correct this, maybe you can insert the names, if they come to you.

LAKAS: I have documents. So, there I began a completely different scenario to undertake what will probably be the most challenging job I've had in a long time in the Foreign Service. The ambassador also dictated that I should have a residence in the same compound where he lived.

Q: This was called "Compound One."

LAKAS: Exactly. Not to be put into the compound with the military base. What the embassy did not know was that Bill Porter and I had been students at FSI. I was learning Arabic, when he was refreshing his Arabic. Eleanor Porter was a dear friend of my wife's, and vice versa.

Q: Who was the DCM?

LAKAS: I have it in my records.

Q: Well, we can insert that.

LAKAS: He was replaced eventually by a fellow named Underhill, I believe, or Underwood. I'll check that too.

Q: It sounds like one of the Underwood's of the missionary family.

LAKAS: Yes.

Q: Well now, when you arrived there, here you are studying Arabic. What kind of a Korean speaking ... because obviously you were not a Korean hand. Porter was not a Korean hand. Did you feel that the embassy had a pretty good rapport within the Korean community, as far as Korean speakers, and all that?

LAKAS: I can speak for myself, and my office of some 30 people, including AID. The other point I didn't make to you is that the ambassador said, "I want economic section of AID to merge with the commercial section of the State Department. Therefore, it would be one entire component. I had to deal with subordinates, who were AID personnel, and write their diplomacy evaluations, State Department style. Yes, your question. I have a feeling we rely a great deal on our local, national employees to bridge us to the community. I don't know what the other agencies did. That remains to be seen.

Q: We're talking about the CIA had a very close contact with the KCIA, which is always a bit problematic, particularly under a dictatorship. Let's talk a bit about how you worked within, dealing with AID, when you initially arrived. Then, talk about how it was apples and oranges. These are hostile apples and oranges.

LAKAS: Well, they very kindly invited me to join the large staff meeting of AID of all the AID folks. I remember to my astonishment, I walked into the director's office for that first meeting every Monday and saw so many directors, about 15 or 20 of them. Each one had been delegated to do such and such. I was introduced as the State Department counselor for commercial affairs. So, the economic officer of AID came over and said to me, "How nice to see you. I assume you'll be working for me." Right off the bat, they try to make certain they set the stage. I said, "I'll be delighted to work with you anytime. I have the office underneath yours, and we'll get to know each other better." Of course, he as economics officer already had an entrenched relationship with the vice minister and others in the ministry of administrative economic affairs. So I had to create this all by myself, in terms of first making my official calls. They didn't quite understand in the beginning why I needed to do that. After all, I was an AID employee. You see.

Q: Yes.

LAKAS: But, I wasn't. The ambassador simply sat on his rumpus and watched this with some amusement.

Q: Did AID seem to be getting the word at this time that... Were we getting to a point where AID was getting out, or were we seeing heel marks in the carpets of the office? I mean, trying to hang on as long as they could?

LAKAS: They were trying to hang on as long as they could. It was one of the best times for them. They lived well, very well. It wasn't until after my third and fourth month of being there where I began to take trips around the country, region by region. I went to Pusan, then to the west, east, Inchon. They were handling AID funds and producing certain items. AID really became a little upset about this, because I was taking with me in an embassy van, myself, one of my officers of my staff at the State Department.

Q: Who was that, do you remember?

LAKAS: Bobby Gallagher and Adeholt Monroe. I also took an economic officer from the AID office of economic affairs. I also took a military attache, if it was possible, and a CIA covert. So, I had a retinue of about five or six people who I felt would fit in beautifully. One of them played the guitar, and the Koreans went ga ga over it.

Q: This is sort of a social note; in Korea, at a party, you are supposed to get up and entertain. It is pretty hard for most Americans to do.

LAKAS: I began to introduce myself as the counselor for commercial and economic affairs of the State Department, Foreign Service officer. So, I was beginning to run concerts through AID. But, it was excellent.

Q: An economic counselor, is really someone who...

LAKAS: No, economic officer, under an AID economic counselor.

Q: So, in those days, we didn't have an economic counselor.

LAKAS: No.

Q: Because in my time, I got there in 1976 as consul general, we had an economic counselor. Actually the economic counselor was a State Department officer, John Bennett, who was also presiding over AID.

LAKAS: I know John. He's a very good person. The memory of being a pioneer in this, not volunteering for it, but it was assigned to me, is very strong. I had to step on some people's feet. It was unavoidable. Then, the big struggle came as to who was going to write my performance evaluation. AID said that no it was theirs. The State Department said it was theirs.

Q: I think it would be the DCM or the ambassador reviewing.

LAKAS: That's what happened, but it go so hot, that they said, "Okay, AID director will write the thing, and it will be reviewed by the DCM." It got up to the DCM's office, and he completely revised what they said in his reviewing statement. You can get an idea now of what life was like.

Q: How was the movement to get AID to dismember its apparatus, and all that? I mean, who was doing this? Was it coming from Washington? Was it coming from the ambassador? How was this coming along, particularly during the time you were there?

LAKAS: Initially, I sensed in the early days that no one really wanted to stand up in front, and stop this. By the second year, I began to hear rumors coming out from Washington, from Congress. These were certain areas of Congress, and the Commerce Department. The Commerce Department seemed to be building up a lot of strength, gradually, to reduce AID in countries where it was no longer necessary to have that degree of AID support. I wouldn't be surprised if the military commanders had something to say about this as well.

Q: Well, part of it was confidence building. If we kept this there, the Koreans would feel that... We weren't a full state. What was your impression of first dealing at the Sol level, when you went out, to see the Korean officials at a meeting? Their competence, the way things were going?

LAKAS: I was generally very impressed with their competence. They worked very hard, and they played very hard. I never saw so much golfing. We did a lot of work on the golf course. We did. So, by doing all this, we began to assume a place of prominence that the Koreans watched very carefully, but having seen us not demolish overnight, they decided they would play both sides, and they did. They saw and heard from their embassy here in Washington that there was this program coming on to reduce AID...

Q: Well, here you have the situation where the Koreans were very proud people, and they were getting all sorts of goodies from AID, but by doing this, they were giving up part of their salvaging. I could see a lot of ministries saying, "If we get rid of AID, we're not going to get as much as we used to, and we'll have to do it on our own," but at the same time, "We have to stand on our own two feet." I would think that there would have been a change in the balance. Were you noticing this?

LAKAS: Yes I was, particularly after we had put on a very spectacular participation in the Korean trade fare of 1969. The commercial attache then, before my arrival, had done a superb job of doing this. The Koreans saw the businessmen from the United States eager to do business with them, but on the basis of "Proper for you, improper for me." It was a time when they were saying, "Remember we spilled blood together," therefore, be gentle, be kind, be generous. It was beginning to move away. You're not going to get American business in here on a conventional arrangement, unless there is something in it for us, and something in it for you. We drummed away at this. I remember my speech at the American Chamber of Commerce, in which I hit that, "Sign here, to see to that we promote U.S. business interests along with the protection and welfare of the Koreans." The AID representatives who were there at that moment were very astonished at this. But, you see, I spoke as if I was independent. I was not an AID person. Gradually, we kept repeating this, until they began to accept it as a fact of life. "Yes, we remember how we spilled blood together. Yes, we are special relatives. But, if you really want conventional business, which has got to come, you've got to understand that you have to offer something to the American businessman, which in return for, you will get yours." We have to compete, Citibank, Bank of America, AT&T, IBM. They all wanted to come in, but they have to be assured of protection of their investment. So, there is where the office of investment performance with top service came into place. It began to see more and more traditional businessmen coming into their office saying, "Nick Lakas sent me here. We need some help to meet the right people. Can you arrange things for us? Can you explain your investment laws to us?" There wasn't an AID person doing that, it was us. So, they got the message very quickly.

Q: During your watch, what type of businesses were looking for...

LAKAS: Oil, finance. Then, consumer services of a higher degree. Here's an example: Greyhound Bus Service. I'll never forget the thrill, I was heading down to Pusan with my staff to do an inspection, and up comes this Greyhound Bus from New Jersey. We all screamed, "Yea, Greyhound Bus in business." Safeway type of grocery stores. We got a piece of the automobile business, manufacturing business, the jeep company. But, it was finance, it was banking, high-level consumer services.

Q: This was during the Nixon administration. The Nixon administration, particularly early on, was very sensitive about textiles, mainly because Nixon had gotten a lot of support during his first election in 1968, from places like Georgia, North Carolina and all. He was very unhappy, at that time, with the Orient, more or less, kicking out textiles, Japan and all. Did you get involved in our concerns there?

LAKAS: Yes, to a degree. But, their focus in Washington was Japan. Korea was a small role player, and also still struggling to move up. So, they didn't really want to harm Korea at the moment, because it was reaching up for bigger things, but it was Japan they were looking at. Eventually, they also hit, I think, Singapore.

Q: Singapore. Thailand, and those places, but Korea was sort of a special state.

LAKAS: 1969, 1970, 1971, it was kind of a special case. So, there would be rumblings, but it wasn't something anybody would do about backing it up. It was just rumblings. You had the Exxon Bank coming over, providing loans. You would have OPEC coming over for guarantees. They were still in that process of supporting it, kind of.

Q: Well, were you running into the problem, which is sort of endemic, thereof, the pay-off corruption, up and down the line? How did you handle that?

LAKAS: One day, Ambassador Habib, who had replaced Bill Porter, called me into his office. This was about 1971. He didn't even ask me to sit down. He simply said to me, "Lakas, what do you know about corruption?" I said, "Personally or officially?" He said, "Don't get smart with me, just tell me what you know about corruption." I said, "All I can say is, we hear, have no evidence. There are competitors providing permanent houses in Rome, are offering rebates of enormous dimensions. They seem to have doors open for them at the highest levels, but this is all rumor. Sometimes we get this directly from our prospective American businessman. I personally have not seen it, so I cannot tell you that it exists factually, but the rumors are a problem throughout the community." The rumors being, "Do you want to do business in Korea? You have to accommodate yourself to being responsive to people whose salaries are very low, and would be very happy to receive any assistance with our children going to schools in the United States, or assistance with the house." He said, "That's not the answer I want." I said, "That's all I can give you." When business people come in to see me, they don't want to see the commercial attachï¿½. We had two commercial attachï¿½s, but sometimes they insisted that they were of higher rank in the company when they see the boss. Who do we see to get the door open? Well, I'd say what we have here is a list of very reputable potential joint venture partners if that's what you want. We will also direct you to the government offices where we think you will get assistance, but we cannot tell you at this moment who will do what you are intimating to me. So, that's what they did. It was kind of an unhappy situation.

Q: Were you concerned with... It was sort of the insidious type of corruption that happens in Korea of lavish gifts or entertainment and all, with your own staff?

LAKAS: Absolutely. It was insidious. It was bad. Gifts. It could take the form of being a guest and a very lavish dinner. It could take the form of being a guest at the summer house of a Korean businessman of this nice young family. It could be receiving some painting at Christmas time. It could be your wife receiving some sort of gadget from the wife of Sam Stone, or whatever. It wasn't money that I saw. It was the parties, the trip down to the offshore island. We would report these events. The embassy knew we were accepting this for the purpose of engaging in more goodwill. I wouldn't be surprised if other things have happened.

Q: When I was there, I was extremely worried about real solid corruption, because I had visa officers, and people would pay all outdoors. Our local staff, foreign nationals, were... Well, we had ongoing investigations. I kept warning our people, but it's insidious. I won't say that corruption is the right term, but did you get involved or observe certain Congressmen who were great friends of the South Koreans, who arrived and from what I understand, would get themselves fitted for suits? Young ladies would appear, and maybe even cash. It was sort of disgraceful.

LAKAS: Yes, I witnessed some of that. There was a curfew on at that time as well.

Q: Yes, 10:00.

LAKAS: I had to escort some of these people back to their hotel. There was also an interest in selling Louisiana rice or California rice. That developed into a rice scandal much later.

Q: That became "ricegate" or something like that. What was his name? I can't think of his name. There was a young Korean lady, Susie something or other. I was there when finally it got so bad that they had an investigation. They sent out somebody from the attorney general's office, a prosecutor named Giuliani, who came out, and I had to administer the oath. I remember that. Senator Ellender was one of them, I think, from Louisiana. How did you handle the Congressional problem of people who were very obviously on the take? No matter how you slice it.

LAKAS: I was out of Korea in 1972. I became the office director at State for commercial affairs. It didn't really come out into the open until about 1974. It was not in my hands at any moment. Nobody called me to ask for information. It was being handled elsewhere. In a sense, I was relieved because I didn't know exactly what was going on. What impacted me was when I retired in 1975, I was asked to consider becoming president and executive director of U.S./Korea Society. Then, it was known as the U.S. Korea Economic Council. John Bennett, I think was...

Q: John Bennett was the...

LAKAS: That's right. The chairman of the board was a Gulf Oil Company person. The then executive director of U.S./Korea Economic Council and the chairman of Gulf Oil Company were summoned by the FBI, as I recall, to Washington to give testimony on this subject. It then worked out that the board management of the U.S. Korea Economic Council thought it was best to change the appearance of the U.S./Korea Economic Council, which was not received very happily by the counterpart, Korea/U.S. Economic Council in Seoul. We eventually changed it. I was asked to become the executive director, and then later the president. We called it the U.S./Korea Society. It was a very nasty period of time. It died eventually. I made sure that in my case as executive director, I would not accept funds from Korean agencies to float this organization. Similarly, what was done for the Japan society. I knew once the Koreans had an in, they would want to run the operation. So, I had asked our people, the Americans on the board, for each company to come up with $100,000 or more to create a foundation, money from which interest could be used to operate U.S./Korea Society, as both a cultural and a commercial enterprise. I tried for 10 years to do that, but they wouldn't be forthcoming. Today, it is just that under another former Ambassador... Again, the name escapes me.

Q: Well now, as you were dealing on the commercial economic side, the president of the country was a former General, Park Chung Hee. Unlike almost any other dictator, he took an intense interest in the economic development of the country. In fact, one can say a lot of things against Park Chung Hee, but in a way, he really turned the country around. He is a remarkable individual, because of his economic interest, and the fact that he made things go. Did you get any feel about his influence on the economic development and commercial side when you were there?

LAKAS: It was very strong. You could see it in the manner in which he would want to see his relatives and others get involved in it, commercial programs. You could see it in the manner in which the Korean officials were behaving, in terms of working long hours and being very devoted to their responsibility in moving the program, with new laws being created throughout the year I was there.

Q: I'm told he used to appear. In fact, not told, I knew he did. He was still doing it when I was there. He would appear at the economic ministry, maybe once a week or something, and sit down and say, "Alright, what have you done?" In the Korean system, you hustled. Did you sometimes feel in affairs that you were dealing with, almost desperate bureaucrats who have to fulfill something or get something done, and they needed to get you to do it?

LAKAS: Yes. Since we were learning how to put this thing together, whatever this thing is, whether it was an investment law, or whatever, they still depended a lot on us drafting for them, some of the legislation. AID was very good at doing that.

Q: In other words, and correct me if I'm wrong, but they would say, "Gee, we need a law on the investment of such and such, go to somebody on the American side." We would then go back to Washington, because you probably wouldn't have it on hand, and say "What is the model law for this," and then transmit it back?

LAKAS: Yes, or send somebody over on TDY, to be assigned TDY to the ministry of finance, to help prepare such legislation.

Q: What was your impression of the student strategy at this time, and the results of this? Were you seeing the... A lot of Koreans went to the United States to study, off and on, very practical things, getting masters and Ph.D.s, and economic oriented subjects. Were they coming back or were they still in the process of developing a cadre with American training?

LAKAS: We saw a large number returning, because the Korean government was ensuring that they would be given positions of responsibility, beginning at a lower rank, and then moving on up. Also, the parents of those students who own companies were reaching an age where they felt they needed to get back to take over the companies. An example is, we had dinner one night with an important Korean entrepreneur, who was aging. He had summoned his son and daughter-in-law, who had been in the states for approximately 10 years, attending Columbia, UCLA, Duke, and living in New York City, becoming accustomed to the American way of life, and returning and going back into the Korean way of life, because father had summoned him home.

Q: Did you find that these were good contacts, the American trained people? Did you use them much in the various ministries, and businesses, or were they, too, low a level?

LAKAS: We were wise enough to look ahead and work with them, where it was propitious to do so, and appropriate to do so, with the intention of building a passage for the future, for our relationship. But, the real clout was carried by more senior people, who may have had education in the United States, through a missionary work, or whatever, but who were very Korean. The missionaries played an enormous role in getting the kids over, back in the earlier days, to attend school in the United States.

Q: What about North Korea? They were 30 miles north, or something like that. How did the North Korean menace... and it was a real menace, we aren't talking about a made-up one of tremendous military force, under a man, Kim Il Sung, whom we couldn't read very well...?

LAKAS: We, who worked throughout the day, gave less attention to the danger, because we had other things to do. We were mindful of a shadow behind us. It was the families who stayed at home that really worried about this a great deal, my wife and others, in particular. We began to have drills at the embassy, calling for evacuation of the embassy, for example. The local employees being evacuated; some of us staying on duty at the embassy, yet it was a very real concern for us. A Congressman would come in and insist on going up to the DMZ line. I would probably be one to take them up there. My worry would be that some local yokel from Kansas, or elsewhere. By that I mean, not having any experience with the real danger of the family Jones, would do something rash, like attempting to take a photograph of a North Korean soldier, and begin to see the rifle lowered in our direction. I would say to him, "Sir, don't move, put the camera down. Just turn around and walk away if you please sir."

Q: What about life there for you? Were your children there?

LAKAS: Yes, both were there with us. The young one attended the military dependence school. The other one was 19, getting ready to go back and consider a university. My wife didn't like it at all. She didn't like the position of the Korean woman. She did not like the local system. She really didn't know what was going on, so I would explain to her very clearly what it was. There was a very high degree of social activity between the government of Korea and us, between the private sectors of Korea and us, between the American Chamber of Commerce membership and us. But, the feeling that one had in the pit of one's stomach, me in particular, was that you were merely sought after for what you may be able to do for them. That bothered me, although I should have accepted it. It's par for the course, anywhere. It was so clearly evident in Korea, that I didn't want to return for a second tour. Although there was a great insistence on my returning for a second tour, I rejected it. It was a very dangerous gamble, because I had no onward assignment.

Q: Well, tell me about Philip Habib. He was the ambassador for a while. He's one of the legends in the Foreign Service. How did you find him? What was your particular observance about how he operated in Korea?

LAKAS: I didn't have as close a relationship with him as I did with Bill Porter. I knew of him in Washington. He came in and took office just about when the AID versus State Department issues were being settled. His house was on the hill above us in compound one. We could hear them sometimes arguing. There were arguments within the family. He was kind of brusque, very straightforward, I think, in his comments. I don't really know how the Koreans accepted him, or didn't. I have no idea. He was very genial when he was at a party somewhere. He was very even-handed and delivered great praise and finesse. I think the time he called me in and asked me to tell him what I knew about corruption, I understood his concern. He had every right to ask his commercial counselor what he knew about it, but I thought he could have handled it a little bit differently. Yet, I did not know him.

Q: Did you have much call to ask him to give support in your ongoing... I mean, you were sent out with a major bureaucratic mission. That was to begin to replace AID. Did he seem to fall within this or not, or was he looked upon as sort of staying out of it?

LAKAS: Under his administration, which for me, was brief, because he came in in 1971, and I left in 1972, I didn't sense the turmoil or the effort that I sensed under William Porter. I had the feeling that Phil Habib was focused on something else.

Q: Obviously, there were major issues with that, including Vietnam. Was Korea, on the economic side, benefiting at all by our involvement with Vietnam?

LAKAS: Yes. They provided equipment, the provided material. They had a contingent of military in Vietnam. They benefited greatly. So did Hong Kong.

Q: So did Japan, very much so. What about the Korean/American community? Was this much of a community at that time? Did you feel any influence of this from Los Angeles or not?

LAKAS: The Korean/American community in Seoul and Korea or the United States?

Q: The United States.

LAKAS: I did not feel, I did not see, I did not hear much about that, until I became the executive director of the U.S./Korea Society in New York City. Then, I saw a lot of the difficulties that the Koreans were having with Koreans attending America's schools, and coming back, and not being as responsive to Korean traditions.

Q: Oh yes. Now, you left there in 1972?

LAKAS: Yes.

Q: This was partly on account of your wife not being too happy there at how things were going. I didn't extend either, because I don't think the wives are that happy there.

LAKAS: I should add one more point. I'm pleased that I did, because I was beginning to accommodate myself ever so slowly, to the Korean mentality. Corruption, we have it here in America. You didn't get a paving contract in Boston unless you knew the right people. You didn't get the contract to repair the City Hall in Atlanta unless you knew the right people, and you assisted in that direction. I began to say to myself, "Well, what is so different about what they are doing here in Korea?" That was a telling blow for me. I caught myself thinking that as I was staring out of my lovely corner office, at the mountains. I said, "Nick, you're getting into trouble here, and so it's time you left."

Q: Did you get involved in the trade that I was a recipient of, which was, people coming to you and saying, "Can you do something to help me get a visa for my classmate from high school?" In other words, how did you deal with this? As head of the consular section, which essentially was visas... I would hate to go to cocktail parties because I would invariably find myself cornered. I would try to look for a round room, so I could keep from getting cornered.

LAKAS: We only had two cases of visa requests. It's strange that you mention that, because it never reached my level. I think if it did, it reached the local level on my staff. We later found out that one or two of them had been misconducting themselves. So, they were removed, from what I heard, when I was president of the U.S./Korea Society, from their jobs. But, it never really reached in any volume at my level. What reached me was, "Can you persuade Citibank to come into business with me? Can you persuade this one or that one to do this or do that," on the business side, but hardly ever on the visa side.

Q: This brings up another question. Part of a commercial officer in any embassy, is to do... I can't remember the exact term, but essentially, check on local business people within the country they are...

LAKAS: Commercial intelligence.

Q: Commercial intelligence, as to the liability and all, you get information on banks. You must have had a lot of that, and what were you getting?

LAKAS: We were getting a bundle of refers, periodically, from the Commerce Department, for World Trade Directory Reports (WTDR), and intelligence reports on the reputation and the reliability, and what do we know about the business aspect of this company. Will they be suitable for this American firm? Sometimes we were overwhelmed by the number of requests. So many were coming in because it had become known in America that there were opportunities in Korea. So, how we went about it was, (1) local employees would go out in the market and ask questions; (2) we would go to the banks and ask them for what they had on these people, especially American banks, who were very cooperative; (3) we would do the checks that we would find with the CIA. Sometimes we would ask the senior officers of the government of Korea for insights that we needed to have, but not very often, because you always felt it would be collusion anyway, in one form or another. Generally, our reports that went out were very good. Very rarely did we stumble. We missed something somewhere along the line, and we would try to pick it up. But, generally, they were much sought after by American business market prospects. "Will my project sell in Korea? Will my product compete with Japanese similar products, or Italian similar products?" This was an essential component of the commercial office.

Q: Did you get involved at all, in case of American businessmen who came out and were having difficulties with their Korean partners, not necessarily partners, but people to whom they are selling? Commercial disputes, where the Korean company was putting a lot of pressure, almost to the point of physical pressure on Americans?

LAKAS: Yes. There was not a lot, but yes we got them. In general, we found that Koreans were very mindful of face. They were not exactly jumping with joy when somebody from the embassy would come in and talk with them about this, because it impugned their character. Generally, we were able to get a quick resolution, mostly compromises. Yes, we got a lot of that. When it was difficult was when the American firm would not come to Korea to physically confront the Korean businessman. They would want to do it by correspondence. Therefore, you had lots of room for them to argue back and forth, and to exaggerate.

Q: Again, you left in 1972. Where did you go?

LAKAS: I took two months home leave, and then came down for consultation. One day, when I was sitting in the Korea desk office, doing some personal business (they were always good about providing some space for you), I received a call from Assistant Secretary Armstrong's office, "Would you please come up at 4:00 to meet with Mr. Armstrong?" So, I went up at 4:00, and we sat down. He was very pleasant. He told me that he had heard from Underhill and from others at the embassy that I worked well, and it seemed to him that I would be just perfect for what was facing him. That was, how to deal with the Commerce Department, at a time when they were very strong, and really reaching out. He asked whether I would become an office director, and stay in Washington, not only to deal with this concern, but also to reform globally our practice of trade promotions, on behalf of U.S. business. "Here, Nick, is what we are getting from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, complaints, complaints, complaints. Can you do something about it? Can you revise the WTDRs, can you revise this and that?" He said he would give me all the support he can.

Q: Armstrong in the Bureau of Economics?

LAKAS: Economics, yes, and business affairs. He said to come aboard after Labor Day, and I did.

Q: So, you were there from 1972 to 1975. How did you go about?

LAKAS: Well, in the first place, they knew me at Commerce. They knew me well. In the second place, they weren't so sure they could get away with pulling the commercial program away from the State Department. They said they were more apt to be willing to compromise. I saw them frequently. I told them what was concerning me. I asked them to lend me some of their people to be guest officers in my office, to help me revise the WTDR, all the forms possible, and to guide us as to what we can do to improve our provision of services globally to the American business community. They did that. For the first time, I had Commerce people listening, and it didn't go unnoticed upstairs. We also began to work with the personnel division in State to ensure that commercial officers would be assigned to prominent commercial posts, and that they would be promoted as well.

Q: You're talking about within the Foreign Service, the people who identified themselves as commercial officers.

LAKAS: As Commerce would identify. It took some doing. Again, social activities. We saw each other often, on the golf course here, in the houses over there, and a great deal of confidence was there too. I was putting on the table for the State Department the work I had done and the confidence I had built up with Commerce.

Q: I would think that your problem would be, not so much with Commerce, except confidence building, but your real problem would be within the Foreign Service contacts to get these people to treat commercial promotions ability seriously, as opposed to the traditional economic and political reporting.

LAKAS: It was very, very difficult. It was not the track to be on to move up. It was not the track to receive recognition in the State Department. It had been more or less consigned to that of what they thought consular work, with due apologies to you.

Q: No, I understand. I lived it the whole time. I know. It was not considered substantive.

LAKAS: So, we began to have regular meetings with senior Commerce Department people, coming in to meet with senior personnel people downstairs in the department, the Director General and his two or three principal aides. I was there to see to it that the agenda that we had put together would be observed. On top of that, we began to have regularly arranged commercial conferences in various cities in the world. We would draw to Berlin, eastern Europe, western European, eastern European commercial officers. Later on, we would draw on the Middle Eastern commercial officers, and in London and elsewhere. There we were for five days, Commerce officers and us, talking about what we felt was the problem. We would say, "Listen, this is changing. I am here as a Director of the Commercial Program, I'm one of you, and this is what we are doing."

Q: This is tape four, side one, with Nick Lakas.

LAKAS: I was not a political appointee, I was one of them. They had no one from my stud book, how I planned out the service.

Q: The stud book is the Biographic Register.

LAKAS: It was very early in the stage of conferencing and "meet me in my office when you come back from home leave, because I need to know if you have any problems in your office, so I can deal with them. Let me know if you need additional reading material in your commercial library, and I can get it for you from the FSI people. Let me know if you aren't getting through to commercial offices back here in Washington." It began to build up, and then the first promotion list appeared, of which there was a larger number of commercial officers moving up the ladder. We began to appoint consul generals, from the commercial fields. It was okay to now appoint ambassadors from the commercial field, career officers. It took us two years to get that going.

Q: Could you put it into context with the American economy, from 1972 to 1975?

LAKAS: Thank you. That's a very pertinent point. We were fortunate to have, again in tightening up the economy, at that time, American companies eager to go abroad. They were very eager to rely on us for assistance. It's as if they were saying, "Going to the Canadian embassy or the British embassy, they get helped." I think it was the right time, the right place, and the right person. We had the right people in the Commerce Department to work with me. What we didn't have was political appointees who were serving as deputy assistant secretaries of state willing to forego the status at State to be more open with those less equivalent in the Commerce Department. So, it took us lower agency people to sort things out. We would win natural fist fights in Rio De Janeiro. It was that bad.

Q: What was the issue?

LAKAS: Who was the big shot of the conference? Who lead this and who lead that? We are the ones who are going to tell you what to do. It didn't go over very well. But, we would move in and sort things out. By the time I left in 1975, and I left because of personal family reasons, I had made Class I. In those days and other that system, reaching Class I was an accomplishment.

Q: Everything else was really. You haven't been appointed as ambassador. This is up to a political luck of the draw. In the career ladder, this was pretty much...

LAKAS: I was seven promotions to Class I. I was one of them. I left six months early, with considerable concern, if I was doing the right thing or not. At any rate, things are moving splendidly. Promotion is in place. We were proving to the community that we meant business. That business meant a lot to us. That we didn't behave ourselves and respond, "Somebody else will do it." That's what happened three years later.

Q: You know, it's an abdication of power, which is, in a bureaucracy, almost fatal. At the same time, they almost lost the consular function to INS. It was a bad period. Without getting into too much detail, why did you retire?

LAKAS: The two boys needed attention here. My wife had tired of being in a fishbowl. She had tired of what she thought was a hypocrisy of life for a woman in the Foreign Service. Rather than go it alone, I decided to retire. I didn't want to stay any longer in State. I think a malaise had fallen upon us. That's the best way to put it. It wasn't because I wasn't being recognized, because I was. I think, mentally and subliminally, we were in this house, and we liked it a lot. It was comfortable. We just didn't have the desire, the hunger to move on, along with other things that I described to you. So, I had to make a decision. I was offered the consul general in Bombay, the consul general in Calcutta, the consul general in Salonika. They couldn't understand why I was not responding.

Q: Your time had come. A question suddenly occurred to me. By 1975, here you were dealing with issues, but you also had personnel that you were dealing with. Was there, within the commercial side, any room for women as commercial officers, or had their time not come?

LAKAS: No. It was just beginning. We saw this happen in 1974, when they sent out Joan Plaisted, from the International Bureau, to Korea, to do an inspection, to consult with Korean officials. At first, the Koreans were rather concerned that a woman was going to be dealing with them. We made sure that we threw our entire power and status behind her. So, when I spoke, they got the message that this was for real.

Q: I interviewed her, and she said the way they got around it was they called her Mr. Plaisted. They had her go to kisaeng parties.

LAKAS: I did that.

Q: Very good. She really remembers this. She never became an ambassador.

LAKAS: She's been in touch with me. I did that, and I made sure I escorted her to her hotel room, because some of the Korean officers were having ideas about other things. So, we gave Joan a fantastic two weeks in Korea. She got press exposure, trips to various regions, Pusan, Masan, Inchon, everywhere. We had discussions with the boys over at the Ministry of Finance, the boys at the Ministry of Trade, kisaeng parties for her. It had never, ever happened before, but we spoke up. We said to them, "This is for you. Accept it. I'll be there with you, not to worry." It worked out well. Then, there was another girl sent out after I left. I can't remember her name. I think she was a friend of Joan's. Then, we had Joan appointed to the Foreign Service. After that, she became DCM in Morocco, then became ambassador to the Marshall Islands. Several other women also had done commercial work. It's the best way I can describe it. Not really commercial officer, in the sense of commercial appointee, but commercial officer. So, they moved on. I don't know what's happening now.

Q: Well, you find in the Foreign Service, in a way, the whole male-female issue, I won't say has disappeared, but we have so many women in positions of responsibility. It's quite a different Foreign Service than the one we knew. It's much better in a way.

In 1975, you retired. We might just sort of touch on it. You became involved in the Korean/American...

LAKAS: That came a little bit later. A few months after I retired, I received calls for assistance from a couple of major American firms, whose representatives remembered me from Seoul, Korea, and what I had done for them. They were having problems with their Korean partners, joint ventures. These were big, big Korean ventures. So, I went to Chicago on one case, and New Jersey on another. I guess what I did for them was kind of a consultant, which I had no idea I would be a consultant. The instinctive conduct for a Foreign Service officer is to reach out and be helpful. It wasn't until they insisted they pay me for my work that it dawned on me that I could do something for a living. So, Lakas Associates was created. One firm would tell the other firm, "Have I got the right guy for you." On top of that, the oil problem appeared on the scene, gas lines around the country, huge amounts of money being harvested by Korea and Saudi Arabia. It comes to the attention of the medium sized companies that there is work to be done in those countries with the infrastructural items. How can they get in? So, my Arab background came into play.

I introduced them to the right people who were still serving their countries. I escorted some of these firms to Kuwait, and briefed them on what they needed to know. I was astonished to find how little these mid-size companies knew about other people's culture, and how they hungered to hear about this. They were responsive, because I was not there to get somebody's job. I was merely somebody who was helping them. When they began to get five to ten million dollar projects to build highways and schools, and what have you, I profited. That went on from about 1976 to 1980, at high speed.

Then, a call came in for me to consider moving to New York to take over the U.S./Korea Economic Council, from John Bennett. I refused to move. I went up and saw what the problem was. It didn't look too promising. Again, I didn't want to leave my home. So, I made a proposal to them that I knew they wouldn't refuse: (1) I didn't want a salary, I wanted a charge account so I could use my retirement programs; (2) I would want a hotel arrangement that would be permanent. They offered an apartment. I said, "No, I prefer a hotel room." ...(3) They pay for my commuting back and forth from here to New York; (4) They would give me an official allowance for business luncheons and dinners; (5) They would consider coming up with a foundation; (6) No Korean involvement. I came home, the telephone rang, they accepted everything. I paced up and down in the driveway that night for about an hour because I was cornered. I didn't really want to do this. I said, "This is going to be temporary. I'll get their shopping order, and I'll come home." It lasted 10 years, from 1982 to about 1991. At first, as executive director, subsequently as both executive director and president. We had on our board, Citibank, Bank of America, AT&T, IBM, name it. Big shots. At a time when there was preparation going on for the Olympics in Seoul. Time, place, again. The Koreans were willing to do anything to be nice. The Americans were very interested in getting a piece of the action. "Nick, can you do this for me?" The Korean minister of finance, the prime minister would accept gladly to address the U.S./Korea Society at the Waldorf Astoria, at the Plaza Hotel, on and on and on. "Nick, can you get us a few minutes with the prime minister?" I'm blessed. Somebody up there really likes me. I hope he still does. It worked out beautifully, but we were not getting the foundation money. Americans were reluctant to do that. I would point out, "Look, the Japanese government money is in there. The Japanese CIA money is in there. Yes, they are doing well. They have lots of money," but they direct what they want Japan guys to do. "Don't you have a _____," with the rice scandal. "Oh, Nick, that just history." "History, okay, I've had enough. It's time for me to retire for the third time in my life. Bye." They were paying me good money, six figures plus all the other things that went with it.

They searched for two years to find a successor to me. It's Donald Gregg, and he is still there.

Q: He's a former ambassador to Korea.

LAKAS: Yes, right. He's very useful, damn good. He's a Bush family friend. The Koreans know these things you see. Now, Korean money has come in plentiful. Korean culture agencies, Korean trade associations, Korean trade promotion group, to create CIA, and on and on and on. Big money, ten million dollars at least.

Q: It's come out on behalf of Korean interest, as opposed to American interest. Well, I think this is a good place to stop. So, I thank you very much.

End of interview